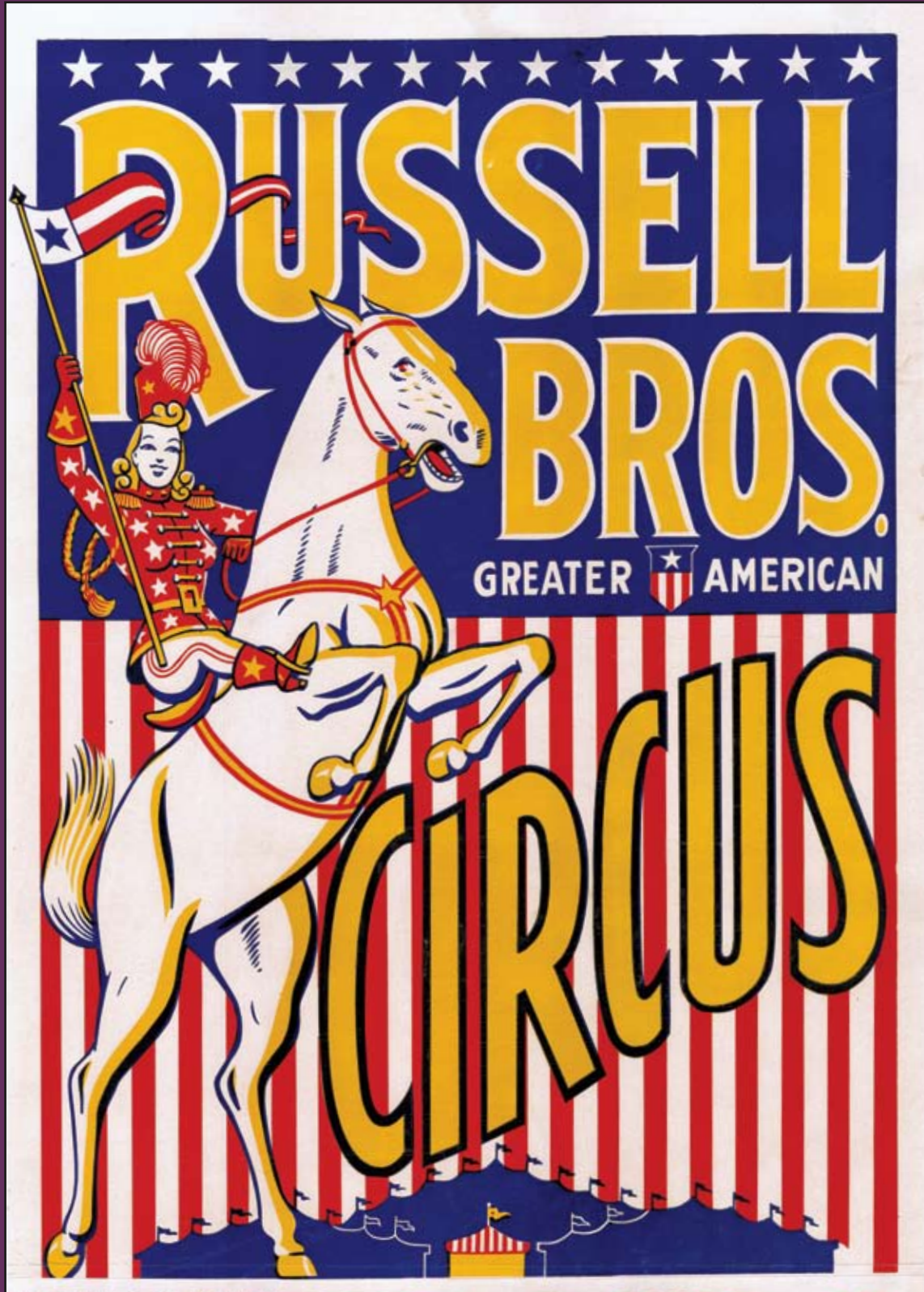


# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 64 No. 3 2020



# The Covers - Two 1943 Posters

What could be more American than stars and stripes and the Statue of Liberty? The circuses represented on *Bandwagon's* covers boldly employed such symbols of national pride on these posters they used in 1943. Note that Russell and Cole emphasized the essential role of women in their wartime big top performances.

During that second year after the U.S. entry into World War II, both Russell Bros. and Cole Bros. experienced profitable routing on the West Coast. Russell Bros. Greater American Circus launched its season with a 17-day stand in Los Angeles in late April. Ten weeks later, Claude and Pauline Russell Webb finalized the sale of their large truck show to Art Concello during a stand in Stockton, California. Meanwhile, Zack Terrell continued to operate the Cole Bros. railroad show he had created with Jess Adkins in 1935. Cole Bros. arrived in the Pacific Northwest in late August and played most of September and October in California.

Cole Bros. Circus promoted its "Victory" spec with the half-sheet on the back cover, printed by U. S. Poster in Erie, Pennsylvania (with offices in Cincinnati). The printer of the Russell Bros. half-sheet bill on the front cover has not been confirmed.

## The Articles

This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. Two of the articles in this issue are set against the backdrop of that global war. Chris Berry's first contribution studies the impact on the circus scene in the United States during the horrible episode of "total war." It is a fascinating account that is jam-packed with new information. Chris also provides us with the story of Henry Ringling North's heroic missions during his service in the Navy's OSS.

Aíne Murphy Norris, sheds light on aerialist Eva Howard Clark who died following a shooting on the Cole Bros. Circus lot in 1906. Norris has uncovered many details about Clark's performing career and helps sort through the "lore" concerning the mysterious shooting all those many years ago.

Ralph Pierce generously guides us on a special viewing of rare items he and his wife Joan have assembled over the past 60 years. The treasures shared on these pages give us a glimpse of the magnificent assortment of wonders in the Pierce collection.

The last article in this issue chronicles the story of Israel's first circus during the post-World War II years. Stav Meishar writes of the evolution of Ziratron – a circus, a venue and a producer of varied shows in the 1950s and 1960s.

## Clarifications

Regarding "Emmett Kelly in the Spotlight" (*Bandwagon* Vol. 64, No. 2), Emmett Kelly died March 28, 1978, and when Kelly joined Howe's Great London in 1921, the show had already been sold by Fred Buchanan to Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers.

# Circus Historical Society

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# Bandwagon

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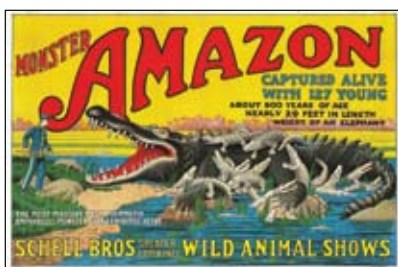
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# The Circus





# in Wartime 1941-1945

*by Chris Berry*



*Cole Bros. Circus, June 29, 1944, Madison, Wisconsin*  
Illinois State University Milner Library, Special Collections



On December 6, 1941, the E. K. Fernandes Circus wrapped up a four-day stand at the U.S. Army's Schofield Barracks on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Among those on the program were several performers who had toured the mainland states earlier in the year, including the Naitto Troupe of Chinese wire-walkers, Reuben Castang's chimpanzees and the Flying Beehees trapeze act.

As the performance came to an end that Saturday night, the soldiers and civilians attending the Fernandes circus had no idea that six aircraft carriers were positioned off of Oahu, and the Imperial Japanese Navy was preparing its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>1</sup>

what we will attempt to give it.”<sup>2</sup>

From *The Greatest Show on Earth* down to the smallest of truck shows, America's wartime circuses oozed patriotism through performances that embraced the red, white and blue.

Vital material such as rubber, canvas and gasoline soon became scarce and the government was forced to establish priorities. For the next several years some items were rationed while others required permits, yet the biggest challenge for circuses in the mid-1940s was labor.

Some 16 million Americans entered the armed forces during World War II, but not all at once. After an early surge of volunteers, the military drafted only enough men it could absorb, as many bases still had to be built.

When the 1942 season started, Ringling's director of personnel, Pat Valdo, believed there were still plenty of young men available to staff the show. “All told, our employment situation is pretty good,” he told a reporter. “If we could use half of those who knock on our doors in Sarasota and ask for jobs, we would have an army nearly as large as a division.”<sup>3</sup>

His perspective would soon change.

In the months that immediately followed the attack on Pearl Harbor draft registration was gathering steam, and when a curly haired 39-year-old was registering in Akron, Ohio, a volunteer asked where he worked. “In animal cages,” he replied.

It was Clyde Beatty, who registered as he was making plans to move his wild animal park from Ft. Lauderdale

to Ohio.<sup>4</sup> Although he was eligible for the draft, his number was never called up, and while the Beatty name would be attached to various shows during the war, in 1942 his wild animal act was the main attraction on the Johnny J. Jones carnival.

Among those given deferments were John and Henry Ringling North, and in the months leading up to the 1942 New York opening they were immersed in one of the most ambitious productions in the history of the circus. The program that season was designed by Norman Bel Geddes and featured eleven major productions, including *The Wedding*



*Cole Bros. was among the shows that admitted thousands of servicemen and women to the circus for free.*

Chris Berry Collection

The world changed on December 7 and the circus – like the rest of America – went to war.

Although most American circuses were in winter quarters when the United States entered the war, nearly all of them announced that they would tour in 1942. The U.S. economy had already been stimulated by the war in Europe, and those who had scrimped during The Great Depression once again had money in their pockets. By early spring at least 32 shows were on the road.

“The country needs something to help combat the war jitters,” John Ringling North said at the time, “and that is



of *Mr. and Mrs. Gargantua* and the spectacle *Holidays*. The most talked about feature, however, was *The Ballet of the Elephants* staged by Broadway's John Murray Anderson, choreographed by George Balanchine, and presented to the music of composer Igor Stravinsky.

It only took Stravinsky a few days to compose the short instrumental titled *Circus Polka*: For a Young Elephant, after which Balanchine "choreographed" the display that included 50 elephants dressed in pink tutus, along with the same number of showgirls. Veteran bandmaster Merle Evans recalled that his circus band had trouble mastering Stravinsky's score, rehearsing the three-minute tune for hours. "It got so my boys in the band would mutter, 'Here comes Igor,' when the elephants' music cue approached. Then they would say, 'There goes Igor' when it was over in a tone that meant, 'We are glad that is over.'"<sup>5</sup>

field promotion to the position of general manager.<sup>7</sup>

Despite a threatened strike of performers on opening night, the press showered the circus with accolades. The *New York Times* described "a show of extraordinary beauty...a circus with the pastel quality of a child's dream."<sup>8</sup>

The star-studded performance included Alfred Court, the Wallendas and the Cristianis, and was notable as being Emmett Kelly's debut with *The Greatest Show on Earth*. The program ended with a patriotic production number titled *The Circus Salutes America*, which included the unfurling of enormous canvas portraits of President Roosevelt.

Patriotism was also apparent in the Cole Bros. spec titled *My America*, and despite 21 days of rain during the first two months of the season, business was strong for the nation's only other railroad circus. In ordinary times three weeks of rain could be a disaster for any outdoor show, but



*After hundreds of their working men were drafted into the armed forces, circuses became more and more dependent on local children for help setting up in each new town.*

Illinois State University Milner Library, Special Collections

Six days before the New York opening at Madison Square Garden, as the show's railroad cars were being loaded onto a ferryboat to cross the Hudson River, veteran general manager George Smith was fired by Henry Ringling North. Smith had been drinking<sup>6</sup> and as North recalled, "it became evident to me that George was in no condition to manage the complicated operation and get the show set up at the Garden."

Buddy North then conferred with aerialist Art Concello who assured him that he could handle the complicated operation, and the 31-year-old trapeze artist was given a battle-

with the war economy booming and a population thirsting for entertainment, ticket sales for Zack Terrell's circus were extraordinary.<sup>9</sup>

Although Terrell was careful to avoid the big industrial cities on the east coast where transportation problems had plagued circuses during World War I, he did not hesitate to play the port cities in California, Oregon and Washington where men and materiel were being shipped to the Pacific.

As the Cole Bros. train began the journey west, Russell Bros. became the first truck circus ever to set up at the fabled Los Angeles showgrounds at the corner of Washington and



Hill Streets. Claude and Pauline Webb's 5,000 seat tent was packed for ten days, and while the performance was thrilling, there was never more excitement under the big top than during the evening performance on April 8 when ringmaster Norman Carroll told those in attendance that a squadron of suspicious aircraft was believed to be approaching Los Angeles, and in minutes the city would be entirely blacked out.

A *Los Angeles Times* reporter described what happened next:

"The band struck up a smart tune and all of the lights in the tent went out. From the wild animal quarters came a plaintive wail from an unidentified animal...In the dim light of the one main spotlight, people looked around nervously. Air-raid wardens in the district went into a quick huddle, along with police...then finally decided it was better to have the one subdued light than possibly hundreds of bright ones resulting from flicked-on headlights or flashlights if everyone left...Just as everyone began to become restless, the all-clear sounded."<sup>10</sup>

The aircraft proved to be friendly, but fear of another surprise attack was real and blackout drills were common nationwide. While the scene was not as dramatic as what happened in Los Angeles, those attending a performance of Cole Bros. in Flint, Michigan had a similar experience on June 15.

Flint was a vital production area with many factories, and officials feared that enemy bombers might target the region. A drill was scheduled, coincidentally on the same night that Cole Bros. was in town. Although the circus performance never stopped, lights on the midway and in the backyard were turned off for 15 minutes. When military observers issued their report, they declared the exercise a success and even mentioned that the circus performance continued uninterrupted.<sup>11</sup>

With the possibility of a sudden blackout at any time, both Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and Cole Bros. had all the lights on the lot wired to a single switch. Cole Bros. also had its own air raid wardens and a telephone installed at the announcer's box.<sup>12</sup> Later in the season, when Cole Bros. was in Jackson, Mississippi, local officials actually cancelled a blackout drill so that residents could attend the show, the first major circus to visit the city since 1936.<sup>13</sup>

Although blackouts on the circus lot were few and far between, labor shortages soon became a daily occurrence. Just a few weeks into the Cole Bros. season, clown Freddie Freeman wrote that performers had added a daily helping of "cherry pie" to their duties, and everyone was expected to load trunks, set up chairs and help take down the show each night.<sup>14</sup>

Manpower was not the only scarce commodity. Suddenly everything from manila rope to Gargantua's bananas were hard to come by. Even Lou Jacobs had to replace his

enormous bulbous rubber nose with one made of putty.<sup>15</sup>

When questioned about the shortages John Ringling North promised that the circus would meet the challenges head on. "The show kept going during the first World War," he told a reporter, adding, "I hope and believe we will be able to keep it going now, and we will do our best to carry on."<sup>16</sup>

North found support at the highest level when he, his brother Henry and press agent Frank Braden met with President Roosevelt at the White House in late May.<sup>17</sup> During the brief meeting in the Oval Office the President asked how the circus was affected by wartime railroad restrictions. Before North could respond Roosevelt answered his own question and said, "Of course, you have your own equipment. All you need to do is hire an engine."<sup>18</sup>

As truck circuses began to be challenged by tire and gasoline rationing, the first obvious change for rail shows was longer stands. Cities that had previously been played for one day were now booked for two or three to conserve both travel time and the locomotives that moved the show from town to town.

For foreign-born performers, especially those from Germany or Japan, the possibility of internment was very real during the early days of the war. The Wallendas, who had first appeared in the United States in 1928, had become American citizens prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, and in 1941 Helen Wallenda publicly denounced Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>19</sup>

Still, one troupe whose loyalty was initially questioned was the Naitto wire-walkers who had performed on Oahu the day before Pearl Harbor was attacked.

The act was defended by columnist Walter Winchell who not only told his readers that despite their name, the Naittos were not Japanese at all, but rather Chinese. As Winchell explained it, they had been given a Japanese stage-name because their manager thought their family name, "Yu," didn't sound "Asian enough."<sup>20</sup>

Things were more difficult for Fritz Schultz, one of Alfred Court's young animal trainers. When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was in Philadelphia, two FBI agents entered the men's dressing tent and began questioning Schultz. After he admitted to the agents that he had five brothers in the German army, he was told to pack his trunk and taken to Ft. Meade, Maryland where he was held for the duration of the war.<sup>21</sup>

The arrest of Fritz Schultz was not the only story making headlines when the Ringling circus was in Philadelphia in 1942. Just prior to a performance on June 2, the American Federation of Musicians ordered the show's 41 union members to strike.

Among those suddenly out of work was Merle Evans who quickly found alternate employment as bandmaster at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. In a letter to circus fan Sverre Braathen that summer, Evans explained what had happened:





When French animal trainer Alfred Court arrived in the United States at the beginning of World War II, he brought an international group of 20 employees with him. Among the young trainers pictured with Court are Fritz Schultz, Damoo Dhotre and Willy Storey. When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was in Philadelphia in 1942 FBI agents took Schultz, a German, into custody. He was detained for the remainder of the war.

Circus World Museum

"The Union contract with the show expired on May 31, 1942 and the Union asked for a \$2.50 [daily] increase for both bands. Mr. North would not pay it, so the Union pulled us off and has been paying our salaries all the time. Up to last night [June 27] the union has spent \$8,000 on the band salaries. They make every town and carry signs saying the show has no band, playing records, but the show is packing them in...we have not hurt the show at all. What the Union has in mind I do not know...it was no fault of the band, as some of the boys did not know anything about the raise."<sup>22</sup>

Although canned music accompanied the various acts for the remainder of the season, Stravinsky's polka had not been recorded, and consequently most of those who attended the Ringling circus in 1942 never heard it. After the circus band was pulled off the show the elephants performed their "ballet" to a recording of "Dance of the Hours" from the opera *La Gioconda*.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Stravinsky's "elephant polka" was only heard during the 43 performances that included a live band.<sup>24</sup>

According to John Ringling North, the first night that the show used recorded music was also the "biggest money night" in the history of the circus. While no exact figures

were released, the standing room only sign appeared nearly every night the show was in Philadelphia and many people were turned away.<sup>25</sup>

Ringling was just one of many circuses having a banner season. Despite gasoline rationing that began in mid-May, most of the shows that traveled by truck were also seeing record attendance, and according to Ray Rogers, owner of Wallace Bros., as long as the weather held out, he expected his best year ever. One exception was the small Bell Bros. Circus that closed after only four weeks on the road, blaming the short season on a lack of gasoline.<sup>26</sup>

It was not only fuel that was being siphoned into the war effort. Tons of steel and iron were needed by American factories, and in the summer of 1942 a national recycling program was announced. The Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus was among those who supported the scrap drive, and when the show was in Windsor, Colorado it teamed up with the local American Legion for a joint promotion that reminded citizens of the importance of recycling metal. As an incentive the circus promised that "The party that brings in the heaviest load will receive two reserved seats at the circus." In addition, whoever brought at least 200 pounds of iron the





Circus posters were displayed in USO Clubs around the world as a morale boost in 1943.

Circus World Museum

greatest distance would receive two tickets to the show.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the iron and steel that was being collected was sent to American shipyards where it was recycled to help build "Liberty Ships," mass-produced cargo vessels that were constructed on an unprecedented scale. In four years, 2,710 Liberty Ships were produced, an average of three ships every two days. The vessels were named after prominent Americans, and in late March 1944 it was announced that one of the cargo ships would bear the name *S.S. Dexter Fellows* after the veteran wild west and circus press agent who had died in 1937.<sup>28</sup>

When the *Dexter Fellows* was launched in June of 1944 it was loaded with railroad equipment and joined a group of more than 70 ships destined for Murmansk, Russia. The convoy was on the edge of the Arctic Ocean when German warplanes and U-Boats attacked. During the battle more than 30 merchant cargo ships and six navy escorts were sunk, however the *Dexter Fellows* made it to Russia, and managed to cross the Atlantic several more times before the war ended.

As the *Dexter Fellows* was on its maiden voyage, construction began on another Liberty Ship, this one named





*Trains carrying military equipment and troops were given priority over circus trains throughout the war. As a result, circuses were often hours late arriving in a new town. Sometime between May and July of 1942, M3 Grant tanks were seen on the Pennsylvania Railroad passing through Wellsville, Ohio. These tanks, produced by the Pullman Standard Car Company in Hammond, Indiana, were destined for the British army fighting in North Africa.*

Joel Parkinson Collection

the S.S. *John Ringling*. On August 1, 1944 work began on the ship and only 41 days later it was launched by Ringling's sister, Ida Ringling North. *The John Ringling* transported equipment from the United States to Europe during the final drive to Berlin. When the war ended the ship was mothballed in Beaumont, Texas as part of the National Defense Reserve Fleet, and in early 1972 the S.S. *John Ringling* was sold for scrap.<sup>29</sup>

World War II cost the United States over 340 billion dollars (\$4.1 trillion in 2020) and throughout the conflict the government appealed to the patriotism of Americans to help finance the effort. From 1942 until the war ended in 1945 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey alone raised about \$190,000,000 for the Treasury through a campaign that linked War Bonds to free tickets.<sup>30</sup>

A typical event was held when Cole Bros. was in Spokane, Washington on August 22 when an estimated 10,000 people made their way to a downtown bond rally and to hear a concert by Victor Robbins big top band. The promotional events paid off, and circus owner Zack Terrell told a reporter for *The Billboard* that the crowds in Seattle were the biggest

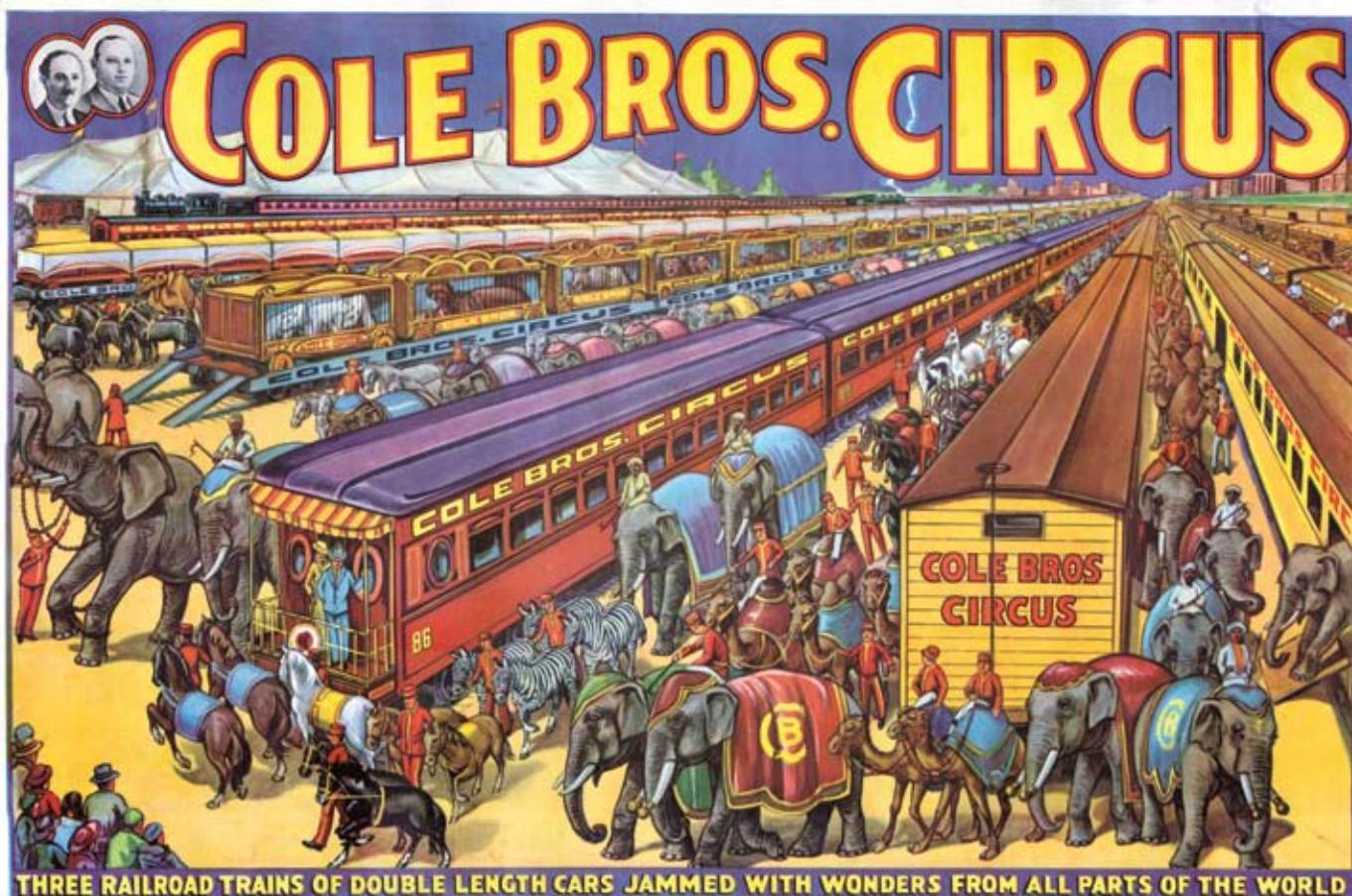
that he had seen in 38 years of trouping.<sup>31</sup>

Still, most of those who traveled with the circuses were insulated from the outside world as Ringling showgirl Connie Clausen recalled. "I am sure that the management, the train masters and the advance men who coped daily with railroad priorities, food rationing, and the lack of manpower, were far less immune to it than we were in the backyard." She added that for many performers the only time they were even aware the nation was at war was when the show played near an army or navy base and the audience was filled with soldiers and sailors.<sup>32</sup>

Salt Lake City was one of those places where thousands made their way to the showgrounds, and despite a high temperature of 96-degrees under a sweltering sun, Cole Bros. had to give three performances to accommodate the crowds. The second evening show did not start until 10:00 p.m. and the after-show lasted until the early morning hours. *The Billboard* reported that Cole's western swing through towns that were home to army bases paid off with consistently good business.<sup>33</sup>

The success that circuses were having in the summer of





**BUY  
U. S.  
WAR  
BONDS**

**SOUTH BEND**  
**TWICE DAILY**  
**THU. JUNE 25 FRI. JUNE 26**

*Towns that had previously been played for only one-day extended their engagements during the war to allow railroads to conserve on the number of locomotives needed to move men and materiel.*

*Chris Berry Collection*

1942 was overshadowed when the Ringling menagerie tent caught fire in Cleveland on August 4. Nearly 50 valuable animals were killed as flames quickly spread through the straw-filled tent, yet despite the tragedy, only eight hours later 11,000 people packed the big top.<sup>34</sup> John Ringling North estimated damage from the menagerie fire at \$200,000, and although many of the animals would be soon be replaced, the cage wagons were a total loss because of wartime demand for steel and other strategic materials.<sup>35</sup>

The possibility of fire was a constant fear for circuses and with the tragedy in Cleveland on his mind, Harry Hunt, owner of Hunt Bros., spotted a sign in Laconia, New Hampshire that offered "canvas waterproofing and fireproofing." When Hunt learned that the chemical was the same used on the uniforms of soldiers assigned to flamethrower duties, he bought 250 gallons, and immediately applied it to his canvas making Hunt Bros. the first American circus to have a fire-proof big top.<sup>36</sup>



As the summer of 1942 progressed, the draft started claiming more performers and working men. When Cole Bros. was in Spokane, Washington clown Danny McBride pointed to the youngsters who were helping set up the circus and told a reporter, "See these kids? They are the fellows who are putting up our circus. Last night there were only 12 men working on the grounds when ordinarily we would have had 100."<sup>37</sup> The shortage was particularly noticeable during teardown when the children who had helped during the morning setup were home in bed. That meant that everyone, including owner Zack Terrell, had to help get the circus off the lot at night.<sup>38</sup>

Even after the wagons had been loaded the railroad circuses often spent hours sidetracked as trains carrying troops or loaded with newly assembled trucks and tanks were given priority on the mainline. Typical of the transportation delays occurred in the port city of Mobile, Alabama late in the 1942 season. A short 73-mile run from Gulfport, Mississippi was delayed by nine hours and the show missed the first matinee of a two-day stand. Manpower was so scarce that day that the Mobile correspondent for *The Billboard* helped the locals set up seats.<sup>39</sup>

Despite labor shortages and late arrivals, along with the devastating menagerie fire, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had one of its best seasons in its history. The circus gave 425 performances in 104 cities, and 4,120,000 people saw the show, with each performance averaging an audience of nearly 10,000.<sup>40</sup>

Ringling ticket sales were so strong in 1942 that for the second consecutive year stockholders received a dividend, and at the end of the season the \$600,000 that had been owed to Manufacturers Trust Company following the death of John Ringling, was paid in full, with a remaining cash reserve of over one million dollars.<sup>41</sup>

Cole Bros. also used its surplus profits to pay off the remainder of a mortgage held by Associates Investment Co. of South Bend, Indiana.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the success at the ticket wagons, as the outdoor season was coming to its close, the Office of Defense Transportation ordered all circuses and carnivals back to winter quarters no later than December 1, with a warning that they might not be able to tour in 1943.<sup>43</sup>

With the future of all shows hanging in balance, a meeting that winter in New York changed the trajectory of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for the remainder of the war years.

When the circus board of directors gathered in January of 1943, John Ringling North presented a plan to transfer the profits of the circus to Army and Navy charities for the duration of the war. In exchange he would ask the government to guarantee the transportation and manpower needed to move and set up the show.<sup>44</sup>

After he presented the idea, the other members of the board of directors voted against the plan, and both John and

Henry Ringling North resigned from their executive positions with the circus.

Under the new management structure Robert Ringling was elected president, and George Smith, who had been dismissed by Henry Ringling North just prior to the 1942 season, would return as general manager, replacing Art Concello, who was fired in the shakeup.<sup>45</sup>

Robert Ringling immediately announced that the circus would, "serve the war effort in whatever way we can," and added that during the upcoming 1943 season the sale of War Bonds would be a focus for the show.<sup>46</sup>

Two weeks later representatives from the Treasury Department traveled to Sarasota where they met with Robert Ringling and worked out the details. The first big promotion would be the New York opening of a show that was heavy on patriotism and ended with a finale titled *Drums of Victory*. Ringling promised the Treasury that every performance would include a section of reserved seats for those who had bought bonds.<sup>47</sup>

Zack Terrell, owner of Cole Bros., made a similar pledge and when his circus opened in Louisville on April 20, those who purchased \$1,000 bonds were given front row seats. The higher denomination of bond the better the seat, and those who spent \$25.00 received a free ticket in the unreserved blues at the end of the big top.<sup>48</sup> Several truck shows, including Mills Bros. and Clyde Beatty-Wallace Bros. also offered free tickets to those who purchased War Bonds.

Shortly after the bond tie-ins were announced, the Office of Defense Transportation gave both Cole Bros. and Ringling-Barnum the news they had been waiting for. The federal government had inspected the coaches, flats and stock cars owned by the two circuses and determined they were not suitable for service on regular trains, nor could they be converted. Nevertheless, both shows were permitted to tour in 1943 with the understanding that freight and troop trains would continue to be given priority.<sup>49</sup>

With the transportation issue settled, Ringling general manager George Smith met with the Office of Price Administration to develop a plan to feed both the show personnel and the animals.

The menagerie was more of a concern than the cookhouse, specifically feeding those animals that required meat. In addition to the 20 lions, tigers and Great Danes that appeared in Alfred Court's act, there were six big cats and two bears in the menagerie, and each day they consumed more than 400 pounds of horsemeat. Under the government's rationing plan, the lions and tigers would only be fed five days a week, fasting for the other two days.

The feed for the elephants, horses and other ring stock was purchased by Willie Carr, the 24-hour Man who worked a day ahead of the show. While Carr reported that he had no trouble buying hay, straw or oats, it was very difficult for him to find the fruit that Gargantua and M'Toto craved. Whenever bananas were not available, the gorillas were fed a sub-





*Clyde Beatty presented his wild animal act on several circuses during World War II including Clyde Beatty-Wallace Bros. in 1943.*

Illinois State University Milner Library, Special Collections

stitute of mashed sweet potatoes.<sup>50</sup>

The Ringling performers and staff were given a daily per diem for food when the circus was at Madison Square Garden, however once the show was on tour everyone on the train surrendered their ration books to George Blood, the superintendent of the cookhouse. Blood would buy meat, vegetables, coffee and sugar on the open market, using ration coupons when needed.

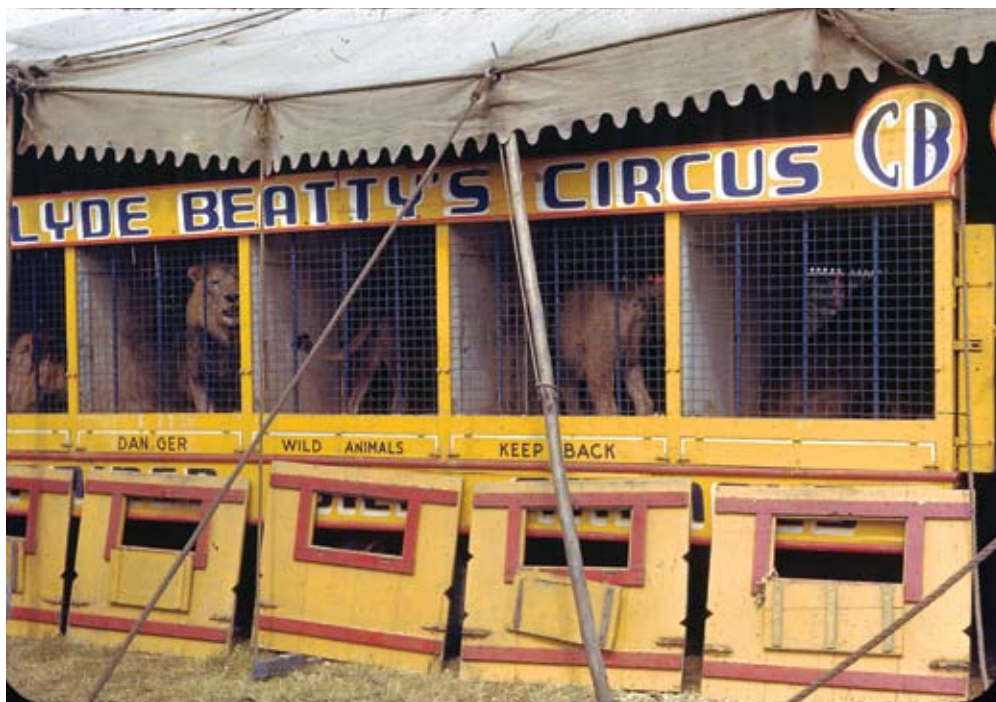
The food was delivered fresh each day, however there was always the possibility of shortages, so the Ringling circus kept five days of supplies in reserve. Prior to the war, performers and working men had been given a choice of three main dishes at every meal, however because of rationing only two options were on the menu in 1943.<sup>51</sup>

Chicken salad was one of the choices when the circus was in Washington, D.C. on June 18, and those who ordered it soon had regrets. During the performance that evening more than 100 performers, managers and roustabouts began dropping, victims of food poisoning. A triage hospital was set up on the lot and the most violently ill were taken by ambulance to two of the city's hospitals. According to news reports, one emergency room

was so jammed that a floor reserved for mass casualties from an attack on the nation's capital had to be opened for those brought in from the circus lot.<sup>52</sup>

Although most members of the audience did not realize anything out of the ordinary was occurring, Karl Wallenda, Fred Bradna and Felix Adler were among those stricken, and when announcer Arthur Springer could no longer continue, he turned the microphone over to press agent Bev. Kelley. As members of the big top band began leaving the tent they were replaced by Marine and Army bandmen who were in the audience. Even Merle Evans was forced to turn his baton over to another musician, though he quickly returned to the bandstand after hearing what he called "sour notes" coming from the substitutes.<sup>53</sup>

Wartime conservation required restaurants across the country to have one day a week when no meat was served,



*Beatty-Wallace was a large truck show in 1943 which traveled on about 70 vehicles.*

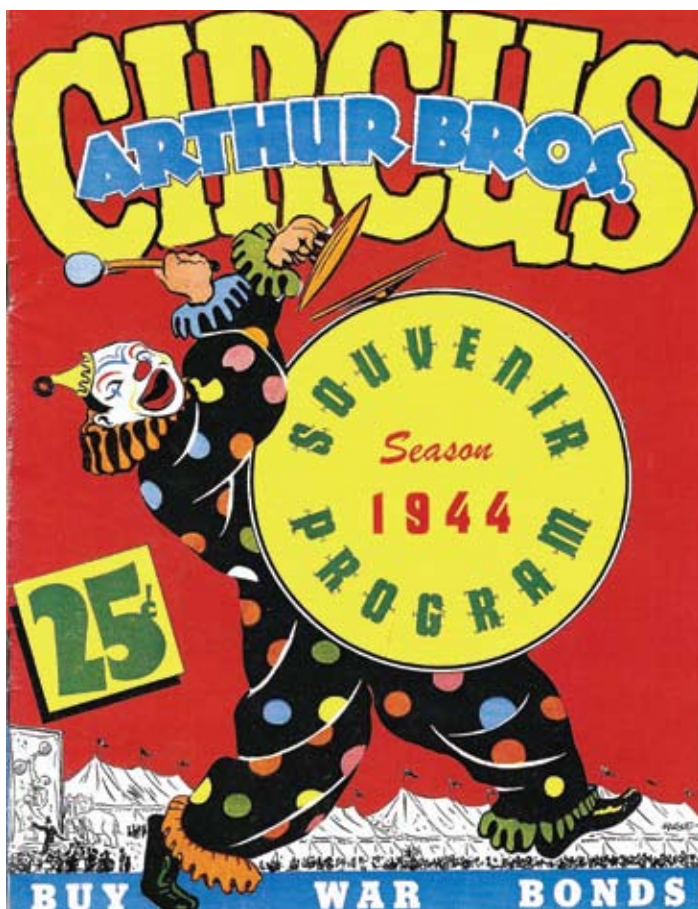
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and the Ringling-Barnum cookhouse was no exception. On Tuesday and Friday fish was substituted for meat and if no meat was available spaghetti was served.

"We are getting along very well," Blood said at the time. "There is a big sign up in the cookhouse reminding the folks there are shortages, and they are not grumbling a bit."<sup>54</sup>

A similar story was told by Mitt Carl, who managed the





Carnival owner Martin Arthur operated the Arthur Bros. Circus during World War II. In 1945 the show became a railroad circus. Chris Berry Collection

Cole Bros. cookhouse. "The food shortage is being met with a smile," he said, adding that macaroni was served when potatoes were scarce.<sup>55</sup>

It was not only rationing that caused problems for the cookhouse. The ranges that the Ringling cooks used were wood burning, and a few days before the circus arrived firewood would be delivered to the showgrounds so that breakfast could be started as soon as the cookhouse was set up. In mid-July when the show reached Bridgeport, Connecticut, there was no wood on the lot and hundreds of hungry roustabouts were ready to start work. As George Blood surveyed the neighborhood, he noticed a fresh pile of logs behind a nearby home. It took nearly an hour to haul the wood back to the showgrounds.<sup>56</sup>

Although horsemeat was relatively easy to locate, a crisis occurred on Ringling-Barnum when none could be found for six days. On the fifth day without protein Alfred Court's animals could hardly perform. Finally, a shipment arrived on day seven. "I was relieved," Court said, "and so were the cats."<sup>57</sup>

Clyde Beatty was also dealing with wartime shortages, and when the government learned that he owned a large big top that had been used on the Johnny Jones carnival it was requisitioned along with the Jones winter quarters. The acreage, located at the Volusia County Fairgrounds in De-

Land, Florida, was quickly turned into a huge factory that built military gliders.<sup>58</sup>

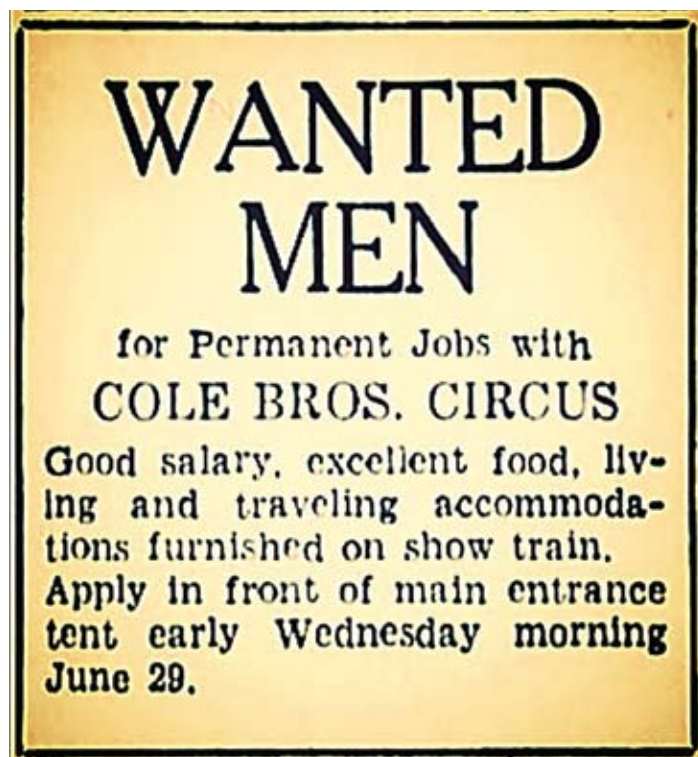
As the 1943 season approached Beatty partnered with Ray Rogers, owner of Wallace Bros. and on April 14 the new Clyde Beatty-Wallace Bros. Circus premiered in York, South Carolina. Just as the Office of Defense Transportation controlled the movements of the rail circuses, it also had oversight of the large truck show that traveled on about 70 vehicles, including those owned by performers.<sup>59</sup>

The Beatty-Wallace big top seated about 4,000 and in addition to Beatty's wild animal act, the show featured Mabel Ward, the widow of Tom Mix. The former aerialist was billed as "Mrs. Tom Mix" and appeared with a group of "champion cowgirls," possibly because of a shortage of "cowboys" who had traded in their ten-gallon hats for steel helmets and their lariats for an M-1 semi-automatic rifle.<sup>60</sup>

Veteran elephant trainer Bill Woodcock was in charge of the Beatty-Wallace herd in 1943, and one of the highlights of the performance was the appearance of Clyde Beatty's wife Harriet who presented an act where both a lion and tiger would ride on the back of an elephant named Anna May.

Bill Woodcock's son Buckles said that his father enjoyed working with the elephant so much that when he acquired his own elephant a few years later he also named her Anna May. The second Anna May was part of the Woodcock family for over 50 years and was presented by both Bill and Buckles Woodcock, as well as Buckles' stepson Ben Williams.<sup>61</sup>

When the Clyde Beatty-Wallace Bros. Circus appeared



By 1945 the labor shortage was so severe that most circuses advertised for help in every city where they exhibited. Chris Berry Collection





*Acrobat John Nelson put the character of Uncle Sam on stilts during World War II. A member of the Nelson acrobatic family, he performed on the eight-foot stilts until his retirement in 1957.*

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in Nashville on September 24, a special War Bond show was presented in front of the Nashville War Memorial. More than 4,000 people attended the thirty-minute program that

consisted of a roller-skating act, trained chimpanzees, two elephants, and three cages of lions and tigers. For his part Clyde Beatty autographed bonds and announced that anyone who purchased a \$100 dollar bond would be allowed to enter the tiger and lion cage with him at the evening performance. There were no takers, although bond sales were reportedly "brisk."<sup>62</sup>

As crowds packed circus tents from coast-to-coast, one of those who sought to cash in on the enormous wartime audiences was a carnival operator named Martin Arthur. Arthur purchased a big top and seats from circus owner Bud Anderson who had decided not to tour in 1942. During the winter of 1942-43 Arthur transitioned out of the carnival business and that spring the Arthur Bros. North American Circus began touring the west coast.

Arthur Bros. provided new competition to Claude and Pauline Webb's Russell Bros., and the two shows immediately clashed. When the two were booked into the same town, the rivalry was reminiscent of an earlier time. Frances Kitzman on the Rus-



*Merle Evans and his band were featured in Hold Your Horses, a re-creation of an old-time street parade which opened the 1943 performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.*

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*Patriotic displays were a part of every American circus during World War II.*

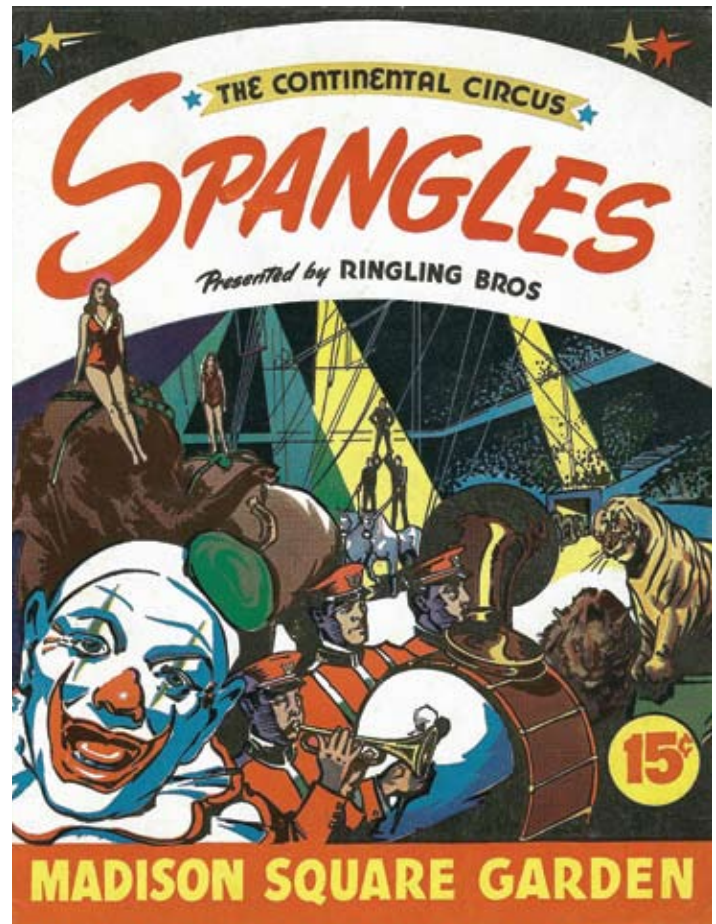
Circus World Museum

sell Bros. advance and Harry Perry on Arthur Bros. not only covered each other's paper, but the billposters also got into fistfights in both Southern California and Seattle.<sup>63</sup>

Russell Bros. was among the shows that had successfully weathered The Great Depression, and when the Webbs had moved to Southern California in 1941, the circus immediately became the new hometown favorite. Hollywood stars were frequently photographed on the lot, and the circus' equipment and animals were used in two wartime films, Alfred Hitchcock's spy thriller *Saboteur*, along with *Tarzan's New York Adventure* starring Johnny Weissmuller.

As Russell Bros. struggled with draft boards and gasoline rationing on the west coast, the same challenges faced Hunt Bros. on the eastern seaboard. Looking back on the season of 1943, Harry Hunt said that he knew that labor would be an issue, so at the start of the season he advertised for help in both the Trenton and Philadelphia newspapers. Despite the advertisements only one man applied for a position.<sup>64</sup>

It was the same story for Clyde Beatty-Wallace Bros. where each day the show advertised for men in all depart-



*Spangles was a one-ring circus produced at Madison Square Garden in the summer of 1943.*

Chris Berry Collection

ments, promising a "long season with salary and board."<sup>65</sup>

"We felt the shortage as soon as we began the one-day stands," Emmett Kelly recalled years later. "Candy butchers, ushers, ticket sellers, and performers all pitched in with regular working men and helped move the show."

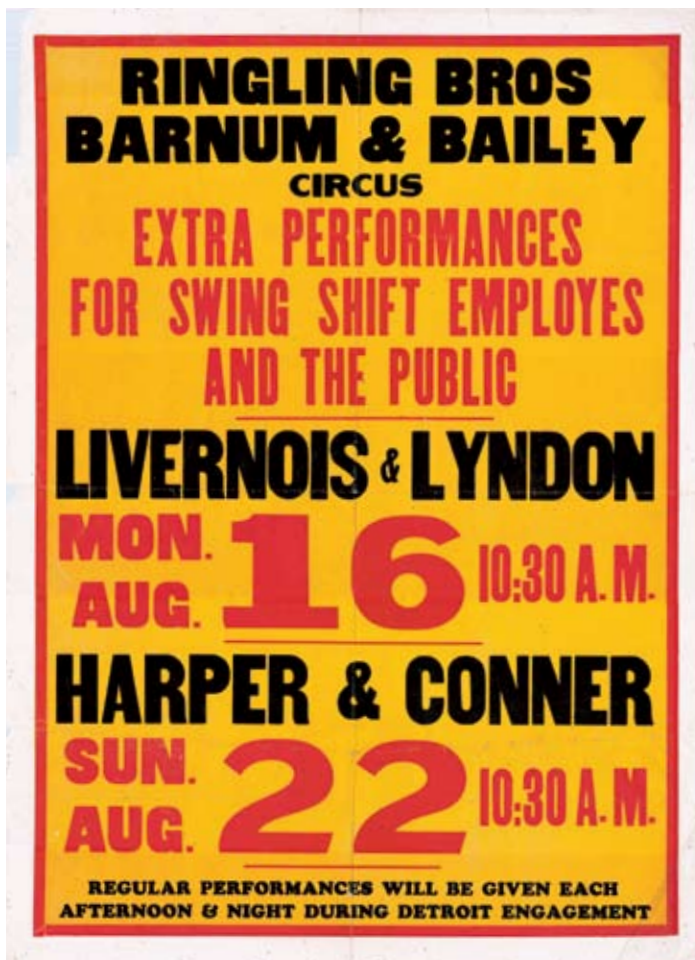
Kelly said that he carried poles and seats, put up dressing tents and loaded trunks into baggage wagons. "It was rough going," he said, "but we always managed to move the show and make our towns."<sup>66</sup>

And once the circuses were set up huge crowds flocked to the showgrounds. In Springfield, Massachusetts 40,000 people attended performances of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the first time the show had played the town for three days.

Ray Peacock, a Ringling press agent, explained the phenomena, "In general people have the money and are eager for entertainment," he said. "The circus has the same old lure, and Allentown is no different than New York. There have been rumors that the show would close before August. There is nothing to them. We did so well in New York and Boston that we can finish the season in good style no matter what happens."<sup>67</sup>

Even newspapers marveled at the crowds. When Cole Bros. was in Elmira, New York a reporter described how





Extra performances were often given in large industrial areas, and in 1943 demand was so strong in Detroit that the circus was set up on lots in two different parts of town. Morning performances were offered for those who worked overnight shifts.

Chris Berry Collection

“hundreds hoofed it, hundreds more jammed buses, and scores rode bicycles to see the circus.” The newspaper also pointed out that although the Office of Price Administration specifically prohibited driving private cars to see the circus, “...many appeared to park their cars two or three blocks from the big top and then sauntered up to the grounds with an innocent air.”<sup>68</sup>

The show that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey presented in 1943 dripped with patriotism and nostalgia and was produced by Robert, Aubrey and Edith (Mrs. Charles) Ringling. With John Ringling North banished from management of the circus, Robert Ringling took an occasional shot at his cousin, mentioning that the circus was once again managed by the “Ringling family” rather than “outsiders.”

“There was an emphasis on pastel shades in the so-called modernizing,” Robert Ringling sniffed. “We are back to the style of the circus – not theatre.”<sup>69</sup>

While the circus did not totally discard the streamlining that North had initiated, the white six-pole big top in 1943 was a throwback to the 1920s, and the grand entry *Hold Your*



In 1944 the Clyde Beatty-Russell Bros. Circus opened its season in Los Angeles at the famed Washington and Hill showgrounds.

Chris Berry Collection

*Horses*, was a re-creation of an old-time street parade.

The opening spec featured antique cages, tableaux and the return of Merle Evans, who led his musicians atop the new Liberty Bandwagon, built in the Sarasota winter quar-



During a furlough in 1944, aerialist Tuffy Genders was reunited with his wife Gracie and son Curtis on the lot of the Clyde Beatty-Russell Bros. Circus.

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In 1944 Dailey Bros. Circus converted from trucks to rails. The show consisted of 13 cars during its first season on rails.

Chris Berry Collection

ters. *Hold Your Horses* was an actual circus parade on the hippodrome track and concluded with the unmistakable sounds of the Two Jesters Steam Calliope. "We made the wagons and costumes resemble the old show as nearly as we could," Ringling said.<sup>70</sup>

The program featured three rings of mixed wild animals under the command of Alfred Court and his "corps of trainers," along with the Wallendas, juggler Massimiliano Truzzi and the Loyal-Repensky riding troupe.

Halfway through the performance a patriotic display titled *Let Freedom Ring* envisioned a postwar society which embraced freedom worldwide. For the lavish spectacle, the Ringling elephants were adorned with gold wings that represented the Greek goddess Nike, also known as "Winged Victory."

*Victory* was also the title of the patriotic Cole Bros. finale of 1943. The red, white and blue display included an acknowledgment of the contributions that women were making to the war effort.

As the 1943 outdoor season was getting underway, a New York showman named Larry Sunbrock announced that he was planning to produce a circus under canvas only two blocks from Madison Square Garden.

The Garden was dark that summer and there was concern by management that the large building might be requisitioned by the government to be used as a storage depot.<sup>71</sup> A summer circus in New York would diminish the chances that the building would be seized, and Robert Ringling would also be able to protect his circus monopoly in Manhattan.

Ringling quickly developed a one-ring show titled "Spangles," that would play at the same time as Sunbrock's "Big Top Circus." Spangles was different than the Ringling circus that was seen at the Garden each spring, and even the huge arena appeared more intimate through the installation of an enormous cyclorama curtain that reduced seating by half and created more of a theatre-like atmosphere.

When Spangles opened June 16, Sunbrock was still





*The Dailey Bros. tour of 1944 took the circus through 16 states and covered 13,919 miles. This billing stand was for a date in Janesville, Wisconsin.*

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struggling to get the appropriate city permits, and although his circus soon closed, the Ringling “European” show received positive reviews, though attendance was spotty.

Spangles was managed by former circus owner Charles Sparks and featured an original score, new costumes and several Ringling acts including aerialist Ely Ardelty, the Kimris and Roland Tiebor’s sea lions. Irma Carter served as the show’s female ringmistress.<sup>72</sup> The audience that attended the opening performance of Spangles bought approximately \$1.8 million dollars in War Bonds.

The one-ring circus gave 55 performances and closed on August 17 with the announcement that Ringling was planning to take Spangles on the road as a 12-car railroad show. Although the unit was scheduled open in Providence on September 11, the project was soon shelved, and dates that had been planned in Montreal, Toronto, Los Angeles and San Francisco were cancelled.<sup>73</sup>

As the 1943 season progressed, more men were being drafted and by mid-summer Cole Bros. had lost 136 to the service. In response, British-born Poodles Hanneford formed “The Overseas Club.” Every week Hanneford would take up a collection to send cigarettes to circus performers who were serving in Europe or the Pacific.<sup>74</sup>

Gratitude and patriotism took many forms on the circus lot and years later Emmett Kelly remembered how fel-

low clown Paul Jerome would encourage other performers to buy War Bonds. “Several times a week he would feel the urge to climb up on his trunk and deliver a patriotic talk for the Uncle,” Kelly said as he recalled how Jerome once gave a rousing speech while only half dressed.

According to Kelly, a reporter was in Clown Alley watching the scene when he commented on how much money that Jerome collected from his fellow performers, along with the fact that he was able to make such a passionate speech in his underwear. “Hell! Who cares about clothes?” Jerome replied, “This is a national emergency!”<sup>75</sup>

The War Bond promotion was a huge draw for both Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and the government. For the second year more than 4,000,000 people attended the Ringling circus, and 194,656 of them were admitted because of their bond purchases. In addition, some 37,000 men and women in uniform were given free passes to the show. In several industrial centers such as Detroit, a third show was added so that defense workers on the graveyard shift could attend the circus with their families.

“When they are worried and distraught about the war and other matters, and things are not going so good, they come to the show to relax,” Emmett Kelly said. “They want to laugh and forget their troubles.”<sup>76</sup>

Although the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey trains never crossed the Mississippi River in 1943, audiences on



the west coast were treated to performances by shows such as Russell Bros., and people were noticing.

Each year starting in 1933 Claude Webb had taken out advertisements in *The Billboard* offering his circus for sale, and ten years after the first ad was placed, a buyer appeared.<sup>77</sup>

Although Art Concello continued to manage and represent trapeze acts on several shows, his brief experience as general manager of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had whetted his appetite for show ownership, and when he visited Russell Bros. at San Francisco's Seal Stadium in the summer of 1943, his dream was on the verge of becoming true.

According to Keith Webb, nephew of the owners, Concello arrived on the lot unnoticed and after he walked the length of the midway, he found Claude and said, "You have a hell of a show here Mr. Webb. I would like to take it off your hands. I am here to make you a cash offer for everything on the grounds."<sup>78</sup>

Concello offered a little over \$50,000, and the two shook hands. A few days later when the show was in Stockton, California, 31-year-old Art Concello became a circus owner.<sup>79</sup>

At the end of the 1943 season, Concello partnered with

Clyde Beatty and the two announced that they were framing a new show that would open in Los Angeles in the spring of 1944.<sup>80</sup>

The Clyde Beatty-Russell Bros. Circus premiered at the Washington and Hill showgrounds on April 7 and ran for 24 days, the longest stretch for any circus in Los Angeles up until that time. The show featured Beatty, The Flying Concellos and Rudy Rudinoff with his high school horses.

Beatty and Concello's circus did tremendous business in 1944, yet despite their success, the partnership dissolved at the end of the season. By the next spring Beatty would have his own truck show on the road and Concello would no longer have to depend on a supply of gasoline as he would be moving to rails.

Ben Davenport began having trouble finding gasoline and parts for his trucks in 1943, and at the end of the season he bought six flatcars, two sleepers and two stockcars that had been used on the Rubin & Cherry carnival. Dailey Bros. began 1944 as a rail show with ten cars, and by the time it returned to winter quarters at the end of the season it had added another stock car, a sleeper and a luxurious private car, the *Norma*, which served as a traveling home for the Davenport family. The circus also added three tigers, a zebra



After the Hartford fire, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey menagerie was set up under the open sky until flameproof canvas could be provided in 1945.

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# RINGLING BROS AND BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS

*Presents*  
**Mr. and Mrs. Gargantua**  
**The Great**



**AFTERNOON  
& NIGHT**

**UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT  
STADIUM**

**13 DAYS BEGINNING  
NIGHT TUES. AUG.**

**Final Performance Sun. Night Aug. 20**

**8**

*Ringling-Barnum was re-tooled after the Hartford big top fire to exhibit in ballparks and stadiums. When the show was in Detroit 68,000 people attended during the first week of outdoor performances.*

*Chris Berry Collection*

and five elephants.<sup>81</sup>

Despite its success at the ticket wagon, Dailey Bros. experienced the same labor pains that faced other shows, but Davenport was able to spin it into a positive story. In newspaper articles that dealt with the shortage of help, reporters were encouraged to focus on the role that women played in every department of the show. In addition to general manager Eva Davenport, females were in charge of purchasing, publicity and the cookhouse. Even the sideshow announcer

was female. The circus also promoted the fact that many of the big show performers were women, except for clown alley, which was made up entirely of men.<sup>82</sup>

And the crowds responded. When Dailey Bros. was in Fort Dodge, Iowa on August 18, four performances were required and all of them were straw houses, and when the show was in Marshfield, Wisconsin only six days after the Hartford fire, the show played to two capacity crowds in pouring rain.<sup>83</sup>



Dailey Bros. was not the only circus that was growing. When Arthur Bros. opened in 1944 both the physical size of the circus and the performance had expanded. The show now had four elephants along with headliners Poodles Hanneford and Jorgen Christensen with his liberty horses.

Horses were also being added to Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus. Just before the season began Kelly Miller and Milt Herriott went to Houston where they purchased show property and horses from veteran circus owner George Christy. Miller and Herriott bought Christy's eight-horse liberty act, along with a thoroughbred black stallion, harnesses and a horse trailer to haul the act which Herriott would be present.<sup>84</sup>

Although most circuses had tremendous success during the war, that was not the experience of animal trainer Terrell Jacobs. In the winter of 1943-44 Jacobs began planning his own rail show but with no equipment available he reached out to James M. Cole whose truck show had been put in storage when he went into the army. Jacobs leased five trucks and trailers from Cole and acquired part of the canvas that had been used on the short-lived Tim McCoy Wild West in 1938. Terrell Jacobs opened his Wild Animal Show in his hometown of Peru, Indiana on June 9, yet despite positive reviews, the circus closed only ten days later.<sup>85</sup>

Wild animals had always been a part of the Cole Bros. menagerie, and in 1944 Zack Terrell purchased a baby hippopotamus from the Cincinnati Zoo which he planned to promote throughout the season. Before the show left winter

quarters Terrell held a contest with the children of Louisville to name the baby hippo. The winner was "War Baby."

Although War Baby remained part of the Cole Bros. menagerie until the show closed in 1950, in the decades that followed the hippo became well known to circus fans after Floyd King changed her name in 1958 to "Big Otto." For nearly 20 years, Big Otto, the hippo that Zack Terrell had named War Baby during World War II, was a featured attraction Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros., until she was killed in a traffic accident near Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1976.<sup>86</sup>

After an under-canvas premiere in Sarasota which raised money for the American Legion and other charities, Ringling-Barnum moved to New York for its annual engagement. As had been the case in 1943, all of those at the Madison Square Garden premiere were required to buy a War Bond, and when the show opened, an audience of 14,212 filled the Garden, contributing \$3,144,600 to the war effort.

In its review, *The New York Times* said that the 1944 circus "was as enthralling as ever, still captivating old and young alike." The Wallendas, aerialist Lalage and Roland Tiebor's sea lions were highlighted, along with the spec *Panto's Paradise*, a fanciful dream that "unfolded in the shape of dancing girls, picturesque floats, dancing elephants and prancing horses," starring Emmett Kelly's "Weary Willie."<sup>87</sup>

After completing its indoor stands in New York and Boston the circus began its outdoor tour in Philadelphia. The first performance under canvas was on Monday June 6, D-Day.



*Mills Bros. was among the truck shows that dealt with tire and gasoline rationing when it traveled through east coast states and the Midwest in 1944.*

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*Historic circus wagons rumbled through the canyons of Midtown Manhattan as part of a War Bond campaign that coincided with the 1945 appearance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden.* Circus World Museum

At the same time 160,000 Allied troops were crossing the English Channel, a capacity crowd was packed into the big top at G Street and Erie Avenue in Philadelphia. Tickets for the performance that night came in the form of a Series E Bond, and 10,360 people paid \$18.75 to see the circus. The Ringling performance that was presented on D-Day generated \$1,576,500 in total bond sales.<sup>88</sup>

On the day before the invasion began, an aerialist turned soldier named Costantino Otari wrote a letter home to his family. The Otari flying act had immigrated to the United States from Russia in the early 1930s, and by the time war broke out the family had become American citizens.

Four of the Otari boys joined the service when war was declared and on the night before D-Day Constantino wrote, "We circus people have an expression, 'The show must go on,' and I think of how many times we have asked ourselves why does it have to go on? Well I am in a 'show' right now that I just know has to go on."

The next day Constantino was among those killed on a beach in Normandy. His death left a hole in the act and at the age of 67, the father of the Otari troupe, went back in the air.<sup>89</sup>

By the summer of 1944, 887 members of the Ringling troupe had answered the call to colors. Another 246 performers and working men from Cole Bros. were in the service, as well as many others associated with smaller circuses.

The news from Europe was encouraging in the days following the Allied invasion, yet exactly one month after D-Day an event happened in Hartford, Connecticut that shocked the nation.

One hundred sixty-eight lives were lost when fire consumed the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey big top on July 6, and in the hours immediately following the fire six circus executives, including vice president James Haley and general manager George Smith were arrested and charged with manslaughter.

Ringling press agent Beverly Kelley was among those in Hartford, and as the scope of the tragedy was still unfolding, he developed the message that the circus presented to the public in the days that followed. According to Kelley, the attorney for the circus, Herbert Duval, wanted him to prepare a press release that focused on the positive image of the circus and detailed the good things that the show had done over the years including the War Bond campaign and a multitude of charity performances.

Kelley disagreed. He believed that such an announcement would be seen by the public as self-serving and it would be better for the circus to express heartfelt sympathy to the families of the victims and thank the Hartford police and fire departments for their work, along with the overburdened hospital staff, and the local chapter of the American Red Cross.





*President Truman's Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, and his grandson were on hand in June of 1945 for the first under-canvas performance after the Hartford fire. The photograph was staged to reinforce the safety of the flameproof tent.*

Chris Berry Collection

After explaining his reasoning, everyone, including the circus attorney, agreed on the message. By the time that the executives were released on bond, Kelley had drafted a sensitive statement that was both sympathetic to the victims and showed appreciation to Hartford's first responders.

Looking back on those dark days, Kelley wrote, "Even though it seemed as though nearly everyone in Hartford had suffered the loss of a relative or friend, or knew someone who had, there was general an attitude of sympathy rather than bitterness toward the circus."<sup>90</sup>

In the days that followed, more than 100 lawsuits were filed against the circus. A group of Hartford attorneys realized that the show would have to start generating revenue again if the claims were ever to be paid. A judge put the circus into receivership with future profits earmarked for the victims of the fire.<sup>91</sup>

The circus returned to Sarasota and was quickly re-engineered so that it could finish the season in ballparks and stadiums. Only 28 days after the Hartford fire, the "Blue Sky Tour" began at the Rubber Bowl in Akron, Ohio. More than 5,000 people attended the first evening performance in Akron, and despite two downpours the outdoor show was well received.

From Akron the circus trains traveled to Detroit where

a War Bond performance brought nearly 8,000 people to the University of Detroit Stadium on opening night. Most of those in attendance were soldiers, sailors and marines in uniform.<sup>92</sup> Big crowds continued and despite 100-degree temperatures nearly every day and a polio scare, 68,000 people attended the show during the first week in Detroit.<sup>93</sup>

Although the circus only exhibited in 27 cities during the abbreviated outdoor season, nearly 4,000,000 people saw one of the 284 performances given in 1944. Free tickets were given to nearly 32,000 men and women in uniform, and 139,000 more gained admission after buying War Bonds.<sup>94</sup>

The other two rail circuses of 1944, Cole Bros. and Dai-ley Bros., also had long profitable tours, as did a number of truck shows including Bud E. Anderson's, Mills Bros., Beers and Barnes, Bradley & Benson, Kelly-Miller and Hunt Bros.

As the war entered its final year, the economy was booming. "In 1945 money was the cheapest thing in the world and everybody had plenty of it," recalled Charles Hunt. He noticed young children were buying tickets with five and ten-dollar bills, and when he asked why they were carrying the big bills he was told that their parents were making \$15 to \$20 a day working in the big defense plants.<sup>95</sup>

A challenge for the government was getting the public to





*The Flying Concellos were a featured act on the Russell Bros. Pan-Pacific Circus of 1945.*

Chris Berry Collection

use some of their paychecks to continue investing in bonds. Officials were concerned that once Germany surrendered, the public would stop contributing, even with the war in the Pacific raging on. To stimulate interest the government announced a new campaign billed as The Seventh War Loan. Although the drive was not scheduled to begin until May, the circus was able to generate interest in a big way.

For the first time since 1923, a circus parade was held in Manhattan. The parade route started at 49<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue and went through the heart of the New York Theatre District before making a loop back into the Garden.

Thousands watched as the elephants and clowns made their way up Broadway and teams of horses pulled cages, tableaux, chariots and the Five Graces Bandwagon which carried Merle Evans and a group of big show musicians. The parade lasted for more than an hour and included red baggage wagons that carried signs which read "Buy Extra War Bonds – Payroll Savings."<sup>96</sup>

Press Agent Bev. Kelley was among those who helped orchestrate the parade and he described how he was overcome with a wave of nostalgia as he waited at the corner of 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue. "When the first faint notes of circus music began to echo in the Broadway canyons, bouncing back and forth from skyscraper to skyscraper, I

was eight years old again."<sup>97</sup>

Interspersed through the parade were military displays including an Army unit, Navy floats and a wagon carrying one of the V-2 German "Buzz Bombs" that had been raining down on London and other English towns.<sup>98</sup>

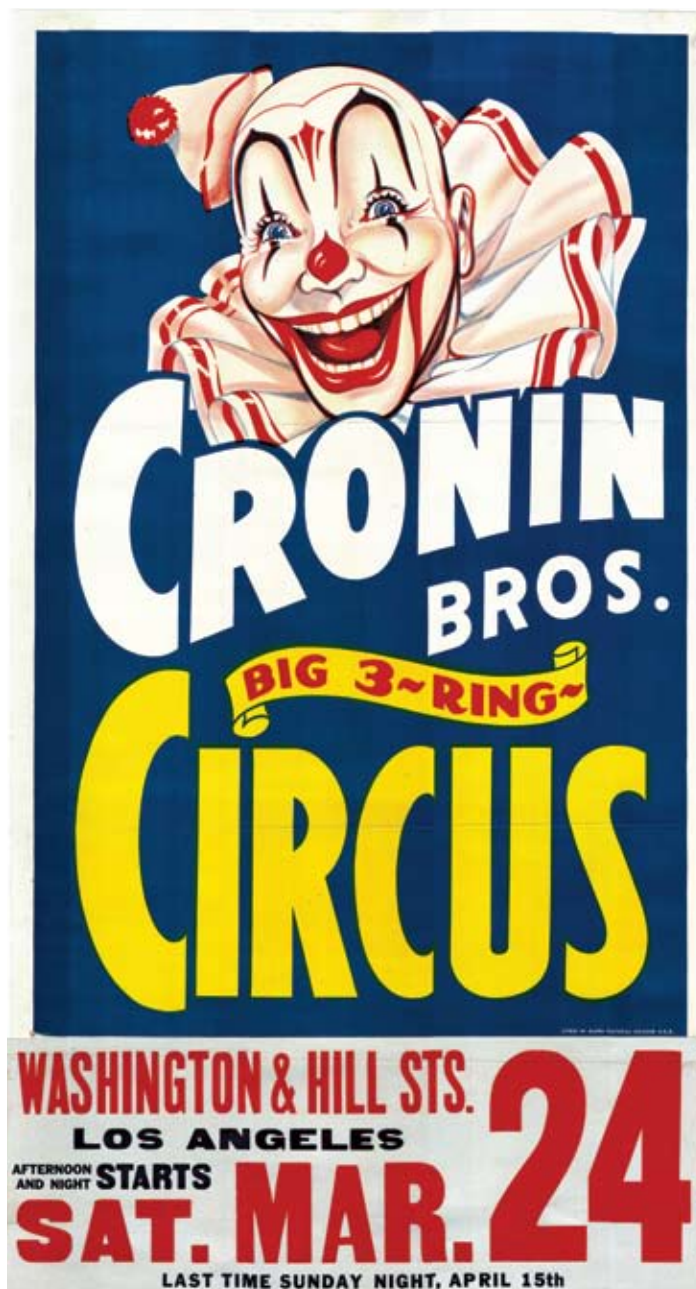
The Seventh War Loan circus parade generated publicity from coast to coast, and once again the audience of 14,000 who attended the opening in New York smashed records for bond sales.

Both newspapers and radio critics were lavish in their praise of the 1945 edition. *The New York Times* described the show as three hours of "laughter...followed by breathless silence...and roaring approval." The same reviewer described the performance as "expertly balanced for all ages, from the weak-hearted to the lion-hearted."<sup>99</sup>

The circus was still in New York on May 8 when word was flashed that Germany had surrendered. According to Dick Miller, who kept the "Diary" that was used in the 1945 Route Book, "Monday was V-E Day and the town went wild in the Times Square, Wall Street and garment dealer's areas...and the night house was the lightest of the run."

New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia had been on the radio that day and had urged the city to wait 24 hours for an official celebration. With people in the streets, Miller wrote





*Cronin Bros. competed against both Russell Bros. and Arthur Bros. when it opened in Los Angeles in 1945.*

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that the crowds stayed away from the circus. "Broadway lit up solidly on Tuesday night and again the night house was light."<sup>100</sup>

After the annual engagement at the Boston Garden, the Ringling circus moved to Washington, D.C. for the first stand under canvas since the Hartford fire. The canvas was tested by inspectors from Bureau of Standards and the Board of Underwriters who declared it fireproof, still there was some fear among the public that another catastrophe could happen.

To reassure people that the new big top was safe, one of the nation's top military leaders, General George Marshall, was invited to be the guest of honor at the opening performance. The Washington press corps was on hand for the occasion and photo-

graphs of Emmett Kelly, the General and his grandson were published in newspapers across the country.

Equestrian director Fred Bradna said that the stunt had the desired effect, and for the rest of the season those on the circus lot would hear the public say, "If the General thinks it is ok to take his grandson, I guess we can risk it, too."<sup>101</sup>

Despite the good public relations, manpower woes continued for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and when the show was making its first jump of the tented season on the night of June 10, a heavy rainstorm along with an inexperienced crew of working men caused tremendous delays for the show.

Although the rookie canvasmen worked through the night, the last wagons did not leave the lot until 6:15 the next morning, and the trains did not leave for Baltimore until 9:20 a.m. The Office of Defense Transportation had also ordered the circus to split its 80 railroad cars into two sections instead of four to reduce the number of engines needed to move the show.<sup>102</sup>

For the first time since 1938 there were six railroad shows touring the United States in 1945. Austin Bros. was a newcomer to the circus world, and Art Concello used 15 railroad cars, wagons and other equipment he had acquired from the Beckmann and Gerety carnival for his Russell Bros. Pan-Pacific Circus. In addition, Martin Arthur transitioned from trucks to rails in 1945 using equipment that Louis Goebel had acquired when Hagenbeck-Wallace folded in 1938.

Those who watched the unloading of Arthur Bros. in 1945 were taken back to an earlier time as most of the old Hagenbeck-Wallace wagons still had their original wheels with wooden spokes rather than the rubber tires used by the other railroad shows. As a result, Arthur Bros. was the last circus to rumble through America's streets on traditional sunburst wheels.<sup>103</sup>

Though not on rails, another west coast show that made its debut in 1945 was owned by veteran circus executive S. L. "Buster" Cronin, the former manager of the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Show. His new Cronin Bros. Circus opened in Los Angeles on March 24 using a suspension tent that had no quarter poles. The show, which featured Poodles Haneford and aerialist La Tosca, was sponsored by the American Legion, with proceeds directed to the rehabilitation of veterans.

Over a two-week period that March, three shows: Cronin Bros., Arthur Bros., and Russell Bros. Pan-Pacific, all made their debut in the Los Angeles area. After Cronin Bros. secured the circus lot at Washington and Hill, Art Concello hired Frank Buck for an 18-day run at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Hollywood. At the same time Concello and Cronin were competing in Los Angeles, Martin Arthur's new railroad circus opened 60 miles north in Oxnard.<sup>104</sup>

The competition was fierce with billboards, transit advertising and "Wait" posters displayed throughout Southern California. In addition, those listening to Los Angeles radio stations frequently heard commercials for both Russell Bros.





*The success that Dailey Bros. had in 1944 allowed Ben Davenport to expand his circus in 1945.*

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and Cronin within a few minutes of each other. The advertising apparently paid off as each of the circuses drew big crowds despite cool nights, rain and wind that dogged all three shows.<sup>105</sup>

The battle between Russell Bros. and Arthur Bros. heated up as both shows moved up the Pacific coast and later aimed toward the Midwest until finally Martin Arthur took Russell Bros. to court. When Russell Bros. was in Boise, Idaho on August 11, a federal judge issued an injunction against Concello which stopped him from publishing or circulating documents which Arthur described as “false and scandalous.” According to Arthur, Russell Bros. had conducted a “smear campaign” that had cost him \$500,000 through negative advertising.<sup>106</sup>

As Concello and Arthur slugged it out in the courtroom, Ben Davenport was now generating revenue from two railroad circuses. After the tremendous success that Dailey Bros. had in 1944, Davenport purchased the train and wagons of Frank West’s “All American Exposition” carnival. The surplus equipment allowed Davenport to enlarge Dailey Bros. and lease wagons and railcars to Harry Hammill, a former World War I aviator who owned a flying school in Austin, Texas.<sup>107</sup>

Hammill was obsessed with the idea of owning a major circus. He had first attempted to buy the Cole Bros. Circus, and when that did not materialize, he contacted Clyde Beatty about building a rail show, but that too fell apart.

Finally, in the winter of 1944-45, Hammill turned to Davenport who agreed to furnish him with railroad cars and wagons as well as the big top that Dailey Bros. had used in 1944. In exchange for his investment, Davenport let Hammill run the operation that he named after his hometown.

The Austin Bros. train originally consisted of five flatcars, one stock and two coaches, and Hammill soon bought another coach and stock car.<sup>108</sup> Those who attended the opening day performance on March 30, 1945 in Austin, Texas saw Dorothy Herbert’s high jumping horses along with Norma Davenport, daughter of Ben Davenport, with her three dancing elephants.<sup>109</sup>

As the season progressed wild animal trainer Terrell Jacobs briefly joined Austin Bros., and three additional flatcars were added to transport his wagons, however the relationship was short-lived, and Jacobs left the show 19 days after he joined on.<sup>110</sup>

Austin Bros. traveled 10,212 miles in 1945 and played 191 stands in 18 states, but unlike other wartime operators, Hammill said that he lost about \$140,000 that year. Still he was hopeful, and when Arthur Bros. closed at the end of the season, Hammill and Davenport tried to buy the equipment, but the deal fell through when Louis Goebel, who had a lien against Martin Arthur, refused to sell.<sup>111</sup>

Unlike Hammill and Arthur, Ben Davenport made money his second season on rails. The show included a patriotic pageant titled *Flags of All Nations*, and although the





Although Dailey Bros. advertised an appearance in Decatur, Illinois in August 1945, the date was skipped because of fears that those celebrating the end of the war might damage the circus equipment and frighten the animals.

Circus World Museum

Route Book indicated that Dailey Bros. did not miss a single performance because of the labor shortage, the shows in Decatur, Illinois on August 14 were cancelled "because of the expected declaration of Victory over Japan."

Davenport said that he decided to skip Decatur as a precautionary measure "to ensure the safety of his circus and the townspeople." According to Davenport the railroad originally made the suggestion and he agreed that an excited "victory-mad" crowd might create panic among the animals and cause serious damage to his new big top. As a result, there was no circus in Decatur on VJ day, and the show continued to Robinson, Illinois.<sup>112</sup>

Charles Hunt, owner of the Hunt Bros. Circus was faced with a situation that was just the opposite. Although he was eager to offer his circus as part of local victory celebrations, towns along the route started rescinding licenses because they did not want the show to compete with their own festivities that week. "We had to find spots to replace those cancellations and we had to find them in a hurry," he recalled. Hunt said that they were able to replace all the cancelled dates and did not miss a performance.<sup>113</sup>

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was in the middle of a three-day stand when word came that the war was over. "Nobody with it will ever forget Indianapolis, 1945, for it was here we got the flash that Japan had capitulated," Dick Miller wrote. "The city was a noisy turmoil, but order was maintained on the showgrounds." Unlike the small audience at Madison Square Garden on the night that Germany surrendered, attendance on VJ Day was "very good at all performances."<sup>114</sup>

When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was in New York during the spring of 1943, a special broadcast of an NBC Radio program was recorded and sent to those fighting overseas. As Bev. Kelley was introducing Merle Evans and the circus band that evening, he spoke directly to those "in foxholes, tents and dugouts...in all the far-flung battle theatres of the world," and said "Our pledge to you men is this. The circus, like all American institutions you love, will be here waiting for you when you come sailing, flying or marching home."<sup>115</sup>

That promise was kept, and in the years that immediately followed, the American circus shared in the prosperity that swept the nation in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

John Ringling North soon returned to his position of leadership and produced shows that included a multitude of newly imported European acts, many of whom were featured in *The Greatest Show on Earth*, the Academy-Award winning film that captured that magnitude of the circus of that era.

But there were changes and challenges on the horizon.

Transportation and labor costs soared in the post-war economy as returning veterans and their young families had more choices of how to spend their time. Radio remained popular, but television, which had been experimental before the war, was now everywhere, and quality entertainment was as close as the living room – and free.

The post-war prosperity had a tremendous impact on society and the circus. Just a little over a decade after World War II ended, the massive tent city that once attracted thousands of people to a new town every day was no longer viable, a victim of rising costs and changing tastes.

But still the circus evolved, and in the decades that followed, those who performed their art in the circus ring continue to captivate and amaze.

As World War II came to a close, Ringling's Bev. Kelley reflected on the changes in the circus, and how it responded





*This photograph of showgirl Maggie Wise was taken when Cole Bros. was in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin on August 11, 1945, three days before Japan surrendered to the Allies. With wartime restrictions lifted, new paint would soon be applied to wagons and patched tents would be replaced with new canvas as circuses participated in America's post-war prosperity.*

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during one of the most challenging times in the history of mankind:

"By its very nature, the Circus is a fighting institution. It never had an easy road. It has fought time and space and wind and fire and water and mud since the day when spectators sat around dirt ringbanks and watched night performances by smoking flares....

"In war time, the people became tough again – like the circus is all the time."<sup>116</sup>

And so it is. **BW**

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# Lore No More: Uncovering Eva Clark's Rightful Legacy

*by Aíne Murphy Norris*

## Introduction

A modest marble headstone sits beside a narrow drive that winds through Thornrose Cemetery in Staunton, Virginia. The stone reads “EVA CLARK. DIED Oct. 1, 1906, Aged 25 years. Erected 1923 by friends with HAGENBECK-WALLACE CIRCUS.” Though simple, this stone bears witness to one of the most mysterious and contested tales in the southern city’s history, a story that has been shaped, curated, and reconstructed by an incomplete collective memory. While she was not native to the small city, Eva Clark<sup>1</sup> holds a substantial place in Staunton’s lore, and her sensational story has thrilled locals and visitors for decades. However, it is time for Eva Clark to take a rightful and complete place within her own biography, a narrative that must shift to focus on the performer’s life and career, and not only on her tragic death. The aim of this article is to provide a near-complete glimpse into Clark’s career, talent, and legacy, with the ultimate goal of giving new life to the performer’s story in the collective memory. Eva Clark was a victim who suffered a violent death; this article’s goal is to make sure she is not only remembered for her tragic end, but as the vibrant, brave and bewitching “queen of the air.”<sup>2</sup>

## A Life Becomes Lore

Eva Clark was a headlining aerialist with Cole Bros. World-Famed Triple Railroad United Shows at the time of her shooting in Staunton, Virginia on September 6, 1906. According to the *Staunton Daily Leader*, Eva was in her dressing room around ten o’clock PM and got into an altercation with a laborer named “James Richards.” Her husband, Lum Clark, was said to appear and Eva “stepped between the two men one of whom was flourishing a pistol.” The .38 caliber weapon was discharged, and Eva suffered a “severe

wound in the abdomen” but stated to authorities that it was an accident. Doctors were unable to locate the bullet during surgery but told reporters that her intestines were “perforated sixteen times.”<sup>3</sup> Eva ended up living nearly a month



*Eva Clark's gravestone in Thornrose Cemetery in Staunton, Virginia, December 2018.*

*Author's photograph*



after the shooting, dying on October 1, 1906 after a second surgery was performed when her wound became infected.<sup>4</sup> She had a funeral in Staunton, attended by her doctors and by residents curious to witness the funeral of a circus woman, and was buried in an unmarked grave in Thornrose Cemetery.

In 1923 – 17 years after her death – a headstone was erected in her honor, commissioned by another circus.<sup>5</sup> According to news coverage and local lore as late as 2014, the performer's husband, Lum Clark, and James Richards were never seen again; it was rumored that they both fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution. Eva insisted until her death that the shooting was an accident.

Over two dozen newspaper articles covered the Eva Clark shooting at various stages, including the *Staunton Daily Leader*, the *Staunton Spectator and Vindicator*, the *Alexandria Gazette*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Cincinnati Post*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Local coverage was the most extensive, and Staunton residents appeared captivated with the immense mystery surrounding the circus woman. However, a closer examination of the papers suggests that the local journalists and townspeople were likely enamored by the sensationalism of the shooting but did not spend a significant amount of time fact finding or uncovering biographical details, as much of the coverage lacked depth and consistency. Eva's name is one of the most substantial inconsistencies evident when taking inventory of the articles. In the span of less than a month, her name appeared with more than ten variants in coverage across

the southeast, with the majority apparent in the Staunton papers. In print, Eva was addressed most often in the following ways: Mrs. J. T. Clarke;<sup>3</sup> Mrs. L. B. Clark;<sup>6</sup> Mrs. L. R. Clark;<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Clarke;<sup>3</sup> Lily Clark;<sup>8</sup> Mrs. J. T. Clark;<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Lily Clark;<sup>10</sup> Eva Clark;<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Clark;<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Eva Howard Clark;<sup>13</sup> Annie Clark;<sup>14</sup> and Eva Howard.<sup>15</sup> While some of the variants were acceptable, such as Mrs. Clark or Eva Clark, others were misspelled or inaccurate. Additionally, research has never shown conclusively why she would have been called "Lily Clark," as this was not a known circus pseudonym.

News coverage at the time was also inconsistent when addressing her role within the circus. Articles only addressed her career as a passing detail, listing her as a "performer,"<sup>16</sup> "actress,"<sup>9</sup> "trapeze performer,"<sup>12</sup> and "aerial performer."<sup>17</sup> She was also referred to as a "fair aerialist"<sup>18</sup> and a "pretty performer."<sup>17</sup>

Eva was not the only one whose name was listed inconsistently by the press throughout its coverage of the shooting. Her husband, Lum Clark's, name was reported with multiple variants, including the following ways: J. T. Clark;<sup>9</sup> L. B. Clark;<sup>6</sup> L. R. Clark;<sup>15</sup> Lum Clark;<sup>19</sup> Lum R. Clark;<sup>17</sup> and Mr. Clarke.<sup>18</sup> James Richards, the man cited as having started the altercation, was named within coverage as "Jim Richardson,"<sup>6</sup> "James Richards,"<sup>3</sup> and "Joe Richards"<sup>4</sup> interchangeably.

Though these inconsistencies could be feasibly associated with the fast-paced nature of a daily or twice-daily newspaper in the early 1900s, it can also be speculated that the errors are due to limited access to Eva while she was in the hospital. While both reasons may have contrib-

Eva Clark was billed on this herald as "The Aerial Queen" when she was with Cole Bros. United Shows in 1906. On September 6, she was shot in the "dressing room" after the night performance. Circus World Museum



uted to the inconsistencies, there is also a lurking conjecture that perhaps the sensationalism of the shooting outweighed efforts to fact-check or uncover her backstory. This premise is supported by Eva's status as a circus performer, a profession likely perceived as abnormal when compared to women in early 1900s society who were not performers. Though there is no doubt that circuses were popular throughout the United States at that time, there were lingering prejudices against circuses and its performers, partially based on anti-circus laws of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As noted in *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*:

...the circus brought strangers into town who practiced a craft that often seemed magical. The performers exhibited their bodies in ways that refined or religious societies often found lewd. Their traveling lifestyle, moving together from town to town in a mixed group, appeared disorderly and even immoral. The circus people clearly disrupted good social order.<sup>20</sup>

Staunton has long been a circus town, listed on the routes for dozens of traveling shows since the early 1800s. Without speaking on behalf of residents in 1906, it is not a large leap to speculate that Eva's story was treated more as entertainment or a curiosity, such that other details about her life were not deemed as vital to report accurately due to her status within circus culture. Additionally, as will be discussed in detail later in the article, Eva's brother-in-law, A. T. "Allie" Clark, arrived in Staunton soon after the shooting and became the primary source of information for the press.

Eva's story has continued receiving newspaper coverage through 2014, but recent reporting did little to fill in biographical gaps or to correct inconsistencies; instead, it perpetuated the uncertainties of previous reporting and the story evolved into a modern ghost tale. The first coverage after Eva's gravestone was erected in 1923 was a 1931 *Staunton News Leader* article that stated Clark's story is "one of Staunton's unsolved mysteries, so far as official records go."<sup>21</sup> A 1959 article in *The White Tops*, discussed Eva's death and re-introduced the folklore aspect of the story, regarding Richards and Lum Clark stating, "apparently neither man ever was found."<sup>22</sup> *The White Tops* article also introduces a "report that annually at Christmas time someone places a modest wreath on the grave of Eva Clark."

The continued shift in Eva's story from news coverage to local lore was apparent in a 1977 article in *The News Leader* of Staunton, titled "Grave still marked at Christmas." Eva's grave is marked annually during the Christmas holiday season with a wreath, and this simple act became an important part of the local lore around her death and speculations about both the sender of the wreath and the implications for leaving it. Many residents of Staunton assumed it was her husband, leaving the wreath secretly at night when he

would not be noticed by authorities; such thinking failing to take into consideration the likelihood that Lum Clark was deceased by this time. According to this article, the "wreath tradition began at the time the stone was placed and has continued. No one seems to know who is responsible."<sup>23</sup> Six years later, a letter to the editor titled "CIRCUS LORE" was published in *The News Leader*, further muddying Eva's backstory by listing her profession as an "equestrienne" and stating that "every Christmas Day since her death her grave in Thornrose is decorated with a wreath from an unknown source."<sup>24</sup> The wreath lore serves as an annual reminder that Eva is buried in Thornrose and still has admirers or fans, but has yet to have her story told in a substantive way.

A 1999 article in *The News Leader*, titled "Circus girl lingered in death" remains one of the most comprehensive summaries of the Eva Clark story published in recent years. Consistent with the older coverage, it stated that Lum Clark remained a fugitive and was never seen after the shooting, even though he was exonerated. It also contains details that were not listed in the original coverage, including that "others asserted that Richards was drunk and lashed out at [Lum] Clark for the way he'd been treating his wife." It also stated that "Eva and James Richards had been adopted at a young age by none other than Eva's husband's father. The three had grown up together as siblings," which is the first time that this part of the backstory had been mentioned since the shooting.<sup>25</sup> The mystery wreath was also mentioned, but the 1999 article says the truth was "uncovered" recently and the wreath is "sent courtesy of 'The Society of Saints and Sinners,' a charitable organization connected with the entertainment industry." The Society of Saints and Sinners has never confirmed its involvement in the wreath placement.<sup>26</sup>

A 2008 newsletter published by the Augusta County Historical Society, *Augusta Annals*, tells Eva Clark's specious story from the deceased performer's perspective, speaking for her using information from the Staunton coverage of the shooting.<sup>27</sup> This material – intended for performance – states:

When I arrived, another workman, James Richards, was waiting for me. Poor Mr. Richards' attentions toward me had become quite evident of late and I advised him of his impertinent behavior in coming to my car at this hour. I must admit though that his fine physique was not unappealing, and he did most certainly have a winning way about him... I asked him to leave. Suddenly everything happened so quickly. My husband appeared and charged Mr. Richards, swearing to kill him if he didn't leave the circus at once. I had never seen my husband so enraged and it frightened me greatly. I tried to break up their struggle. The last thing I recall is the sound of gunfire.<sup>27</sup>

Though dramatized for a fundraiser called "Conversa-



tions from the Grave,” the article speaks for Clark in a way that perpetuates the lore surrounding her death in Staunton.

The most recent mention of Eva in local news coverage was a 2014 article in *The News Leader*, which reaffirmed much of the now-traditional lore, with a historian from the local historical society stating that “her husband disappeared from the circus and was never seen again.”<sup>28</sup> The article, which details a 2014 visit to Clark’s grave by members of the then-current troupe of Cole Bros. Circus, re-states coverage from the older news articles and even compares Eva’s story to Federico Fellini’s *La Strada*, focusing again on the tragic death of Eva with vague mentions of her life, career, and legacy. As stated in the article, the “ceremony ended with the ringmaster blessing Clark’s memory...as he acknowledged citizens for keeping Clark’s memory alive.” The article’s title and one line on the first page are the only points that note Eva’s career as an aerialist, while her shooting and death were recounted in full.<sup>28</sup> Though it



*Alice Adair, Eva Clark's mother, posed for this photograph reproduced on a letterhead she used in 1907 when Adair presented “entertaining and refined foot juggling.”*

Used with permission from Illinois State University’s Special Collections, Milner Library

is obvious that many accounts of Eva’s death were reported or picked up in news outlets across the Southeast and in the Midwest, where she performed in the off-season from the circus, it is also apparent that little of the coverage through 2014 contained significant biographical information about her life before the shooting. Eva’s treatment in the local media focused only on the sensationalism and mystery of her death story.

Thus, researching Eva Clark’s life details and compiling a biographical sketch was a necessary and important undertaking, not only for the sake of historical accuracy, but to ensure that her legacy is recorded as more than just the tale of a violent death. After years of research, interviews, and fact-finding, a robust portrait of Eva began to emerge, and, as suspected, it was much more vibrant than the information about her demise. Additionally, recently found information about Lum Clark adds a distinct behavioral pattern to the story leading up to the 1906 shooting.



*Price’s New Floating Opera, seen in this 1900 photograph, operated on the Ohio River from 1891-1900. Alice Howard and her daughter Eva performed on Price’s showboat in 1893.*

From the Collection of The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County



## Eva Clark: More Than a Victim

Eva Clark was more than a circus star; she was an experienced entertainer with a wide range of expertise that spanned nearly two decades. She performed all over the United States, as well as internationally, from the time she was a young child. She was born of seasoned entertainers Lee Howard Kelley and Alice Howard (later Adair). The exact year of her birth is unknown – articles at the time of her shooting list her age as both 22<sup>18</sup> and 25,<sup>4</sup> so it was likely that Eva Clark was born between 1881-1884. In 1888, when she was a child, her parents were listed on the rosters for the Clements & Russell Railroad Show,<sup>29</sup> and then Lee was listed in Chas. Lee's London Shows<sup>30</sup> in 1890. The first link of Eva's name with Lee and Alice's career was when the name "Eva May"<sup>31</sup> appeared on the roster of McFadden's Amusement Enterprise and Pavilion Shows in 1889.<sup>32</sup> After this, "Baby Eva" was mentioned with Alice and Lee Howard in the *New York Clipper* regarding the season opening of McClelland's Shows and Wild West in Ridgway, Pennsylvania in 1889.<sup>33</sup> Lee, Alice and Eva Howard were mentioned continually through 1891 as appearing in Sautelle Show,<sup>34</sup> Clements' European Shows,<sup>35</sup> and Chas. Lee's London Circus.<sup>36</sup> In 1892, the Howard Family was listed in the *New York Clipper* as having "been engaged for the Wallace Shows." Two paragraphs below the Howard Family blurb, notes from the Clark Bros. Circus named Allie Clark and Joe Richard, two people that would prove pivotal in Eva Clark's near future.<sup>37</sup>

In 1893, Eva and her mother, Alice, joined Price's Floating Opera Co., a showboat with origins in Ohio. The same blurb in the *New York Clipper* noted that "Joe and Hattie Richards are not with W. C. Clark, as reported, but have signed with Price's Floating Opera Co. for the season."<sup>38</sup> Based on this information, it is likely that Price's Floating Opera Co. was the first place where Eva interacted with Joe/James Richards, the man associated with her shooting. Though little is known about Hattie Richards or her association with James, a December 30 *New York Clipper* excerpt stated that "Mrs. Fanny Clark, of the Clarke [sic] Bros. Show, paid a visit to her sister, Hattie Richard [sic], and spent an enjoyable week."<sup>39</sup> This reiterated the continued connection between James Richards and the Clark circuses. Alice and Eva were often listed in the "Notes from Price's Floating Opera" for the entirety of 1893, including a note in May that Eva was "very sick with fever, and her mother, Mrs. Alice Howard, was compelled to take her off the boat for a few weeks."<sup>40</sup> The mother-daughter pair were again associated with Price's in 1894, where it was written that the opera was "doing good business."<sup>41</sup>

The first official link between Eva Clark and Lum Clark was in 1897. Lum Clark was back with W. C. Clark's Shows in Tuscaloosa,<sup>42</sup> and Eva Howard was listed in *The Tuscaloosa Gazette* as being engaged for the season with the same show. The paper also noted that she "is an exceedingly pretty young lady, a very clever singer and a capital dancer and she created a most favorable impression. She was twice encored and graciously responded with other dances."<sup>43</sup> A marriage

**MARRIAGE LICENSE**

**STATE OF GEORGIA, TROUP COUNTY.**

**TO ANY JUDGE, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE, OR MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL:**

**YOU ARE HEREBY AUTHORIZED TO JOIN**

*Lum R. Clarke and Miss Eva Kelley*

**in the Holy State of Matrimony, according to the Constitution and laws of this State, and for so doing this shall be your sufficient license. And you are hereby required to return this License to me, with your certificate hereon of the fact and date of the Marriage.**

Given under my hand and seal, this *11<sup>th</sup>* day of *December*, 18*97*

*J. B. Strong*, (Seal.)  
ORDINARY.

I certify that *Lum R. Clark* and *Miss Eva Kelley* were joined in Matrimony by me, this *11<sup>th</sup>* day of *December*, Eighteen Hundred and *ninety seven*

Recorded: *12/24/98* *J. B. Strong*, Ordinary. *J. H. Nolan J.P.*

Lum R. Clark and Eva Kelley (Howard) were married on December 11, 1897 as evidenced by this marriage license signed by the Justice of the Peace in Troup County, Georgia.

County Records Office, Troup County, Georgia





About 75 performers assembled for this 1901 photograph of the John Robinson Circus troupe. Though not confirmed, it is likely that the woman in the third row (third from the right) with her head tilted to the side is Eva Clark.

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certificate from Troup County, Georgia, documents that Lum R. Clark and Miss Eva Kelley were married on December 11, 1897.<sup>44</sup> Lum would have been 20 years of age, Eva between 13 and 16, depending on her birth year. In the following year, "Eva Clark" was listed for the first time in the W. C. Clark's United Shows as performing "flying rings and trepezist."<sup>45</sup> In 1899, Eva was complimented in *The Hocking Sentinel* as "having given the best flying exhibition ever seen in this country," this time with McCormick Silver Plate Circus.<sup>46</sup>

In 1900, "Eva Adair" was listed in both the "Ballet" and

"Concert Company" sections of John Robinson's 10 Big Shows Season of 1900 Route Book.<sup>47</sup> She was then listed as "Eva Howard" alongside her mother, Alice Adair, in a March roster listing for the southern tour of Dr. Fretwell's Floating Palace.<sup>48</sup> It is unclear why she used her mother's last name and Howard in the same year. She continued using Howard in 1901 when signing on for Robinson's Show.<sup>49</sup>

In 1902 Eva was again linked with Lum Clark, as "Mr. and Mrs. Clarke [sic] (Eva Howard)" were noted as joining Sells & Downs for the upcoming season.<sup>50</sup> Her married name was used in a January 1903 *Newberry Herald* and





The National Police Gazette out of New York City published this image in 1903 with the caption "Eva Howard, Very Soulful, Also Very Pretty." Although not confirmed, the picture is thought to be Clark.

Courtesy of National Police Gazette

News article that stated "Miss Clark... in her aerial trapeze performances deserves mention. She seems to feel as much at home in the trapeze acts as if she were on the ground."<sup>51</sup> However, on May 30, 1903, two divorce petition notices appeared in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*. The first, in the Common Pleas Court section of *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, stated "126.299. Eva Clark vs. Lum Clark. For divorce. C. J. Ryan."<sup>52</sup> The second blurb noted "Eva Clark says in a petition for divorce filed yesterday that Lum Clark has refused to live with her since their marriage in Georgia in 1897 and has refused to provide for her in any way. Besides, he has beaten her and threatened to kill her, and did shoot at her. Charles Ryan, attorney."<sup>53</sup>

The *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* ran a similar notice, stating, "Eva Clark applied for a divorce from Lum Clark, to whom she was married in 1897. She charges him with failure to provide, beating her and making threats against her life. Attorney C. J. Ryan represents Mrs. Clark."<sup>54</sup> Though the purpose of this article is not to expostulate character or implicate Lum Clark in the later shooting of Eva Clark, the background information and supporting details about past alleged offences are included here because they help to establish a discernible pattern of behavior.

In July 1903, the *New York Clipper* reported that "Eva Howard, late of Robinson's Circus, while doing her act on the flying rings at the Comodore [sic]<sup>55</sup> Music Hall swung



into an electric fan and was badly cut by the blades. She was knocked off the rings and unconscious when picked up.”<sup>56</sup> Less than a month after her accident at the Commodore, Eva performed again as “Miss Eva Howard” and the Dayton Daily News stated that she had “marked ability” and was “a charming soubrette who will be a popular idol, and who will make good in a number of pleasing songs, including ‘Can’t Live on Love’ and ‘Blew, Blew, Blew.’ She will also appear in the flying rings and is known as the ‘queen of the air.’”<sup>57</sup> The artist’s star continued to rise with another review of her Fairview Park act, stating that:

Miss Eva Howard, the petite aerialist known as “Queen of the Air,” in her great specialty, “In the Flying Rings,” was a former leading performer with the John Robinson and Sells Bros circus. If you want to see a daring hazardous act, her work will fill all the requirements. She is an exceedingly pretty woman, and has a magnificent wardrobe and other effects.<sup>58</sup>

Additional reviews of the Fairview Park show mentioned Eva’s “great flying ring act”<sup>59</sup> and continually refer to her as “The Queen of the Air.”<sup>60</sup> The reviews complimented Eva for over a month; a September 26 *Dayton Daily News* article stated that Eva was “the charming performer who will be pleasantly remembered by thousands of our best people, will be seen and heard in a number of entirely new coon songs. She will also do her marvelous and daring mid-air and on the flying rings, the best and strongest act of its class in America.”<sup>61</sup> A November 28 issue of *National Police Gazette*, a publication out of New York City, showed a photo with the caption “Eva Howard, Very Soulful, Also Very Pretty.”<sup>62</sup> The photo showed a woman dressed in a burlesque-style costume. Though unconfirmed that this “Eva Howard” was Eva Clark, the photo provides compelling evidence that it was indeed her and the descriptions used were similar to other reviews from local papers.

Press coverage continued for Eva Clark at the start of 1904. On January 16, *Billboard* named her as a member of the Isle of Spice company roster for the show’s Midwest tour.<sup>63</sup> Soon after, in February, “Eva Howard” was again photographed and listed in *National Police Gazette*, this time with the caption “Eva Howard, She’s Very Japanesque, and with the Innocent Beauties Burlesque Company.” The accompanying photo shows a woman dressed in a kimono,<sup>64</sup> and though it cannot be definitively proven that she is the same “Eva Howard,” physical similarities are present. In April, *Billboard* announced that “Eva Howard, who made a decided hit at the Columbia Cincinnati, O., a few weeks [ago], has received a flattering offer to create the soubrette role in a prominent New York production. She will leave for the East shortly, and if the part is suitable, she will not be seen in vaudeville for some time to come.”<sup>65</sup> However, the next month *Billboard* reported on the opening of the American Water Circus and listed Mrs. Howard (Alice) on “Fly-

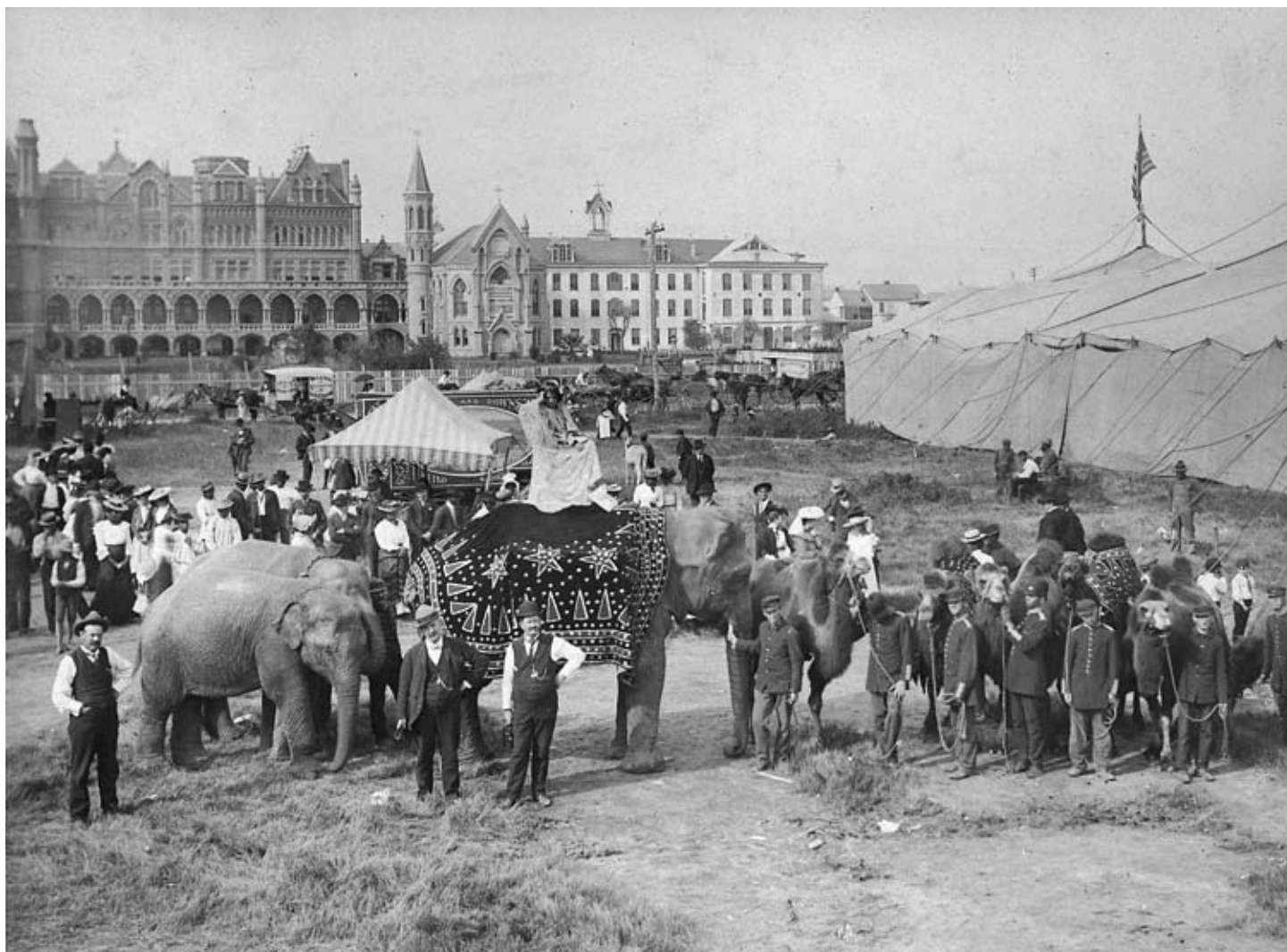


Photo by Gove: Milwaukee.

**EVA HOWARD.**

The woman dressed in a kimono in this February 1904 *National Police Gazette* photo was identified as Eva Howard. A caption under the photo noted that Howard was with the *Innocent Beauties Burlesque Company* and was “very Japanesque.”  
 Courtesy of *National Police Gazette*

ing Rings and Flying Ladder” and “Eva Howard” on “Flying Rings and Trapeze.”<sup>66</sup> In June, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that “Eva Hard, trapeze performer with W. H. Newman’s American Water Circus, this afternoon publicly horsewhipped George Backentol, the circus concessionaire. She was assisted by two members of the band, who held Backentol while she applied the lash. She alleges Backentol talked about her in an uncomplimentary manner. Backentol denies the allegation.”<sup>67</sup> Though unconfirmed that “Eva Hard” is the same Eva, the timeline and locations make a



*Sells & Downs Circus operated 1902-1905. The Billboard and other references placed Eva Clark on this show with her aerial acts in 1903 and 1905.*

Fred D. Pfening III Collection

compelling argument.

In January 1905, *Billboard* noted that “Miss Eva Howard, for the past four seasons with the John Robinson Shows, is suffering with tonsillitis at her home 814 Main Street, Cincinnati.”<sup>68</sup> This is the only known street address for Eva. Soon after, in April, Lee Howard, the “Howard Family,” and the “Howard Sisters, double trapeze and contortionists” were mentioned in the roster of Geo. S. Ely’s United Shows and Trained Animal Exhibition.<sup>69</sup> In May, “Eva Clark” was listed as doing the flying rings and trapeze alongside her mother, Alice Adair, who specialized in the flying ladder and barrel jumping<sup>70</sup> for Sells & Downs.<sup>71</sup> Clark’s performance was noted as “thrilling double trapeze work” in *The Gazette Quebec*,<sup>72</sup> *The Pittson Gazette*,<sup>73</sup> *The Newark Advocate*,<sup>74</sup> and *Daily Crescent*.<sup>75</sup>

The final year of Eva Clark’s life (1906), began with continued headlines and accolades. She was listed as “Eva Clark” on a Cole Brothers World-Famed United Shows herald and mentioned in articles about her “great act”<sup>76</sup> on the swinging ladder. The Cole Brothers Tent City Chatter

surviving ephemera listed Clark “on the flying rings, swinging trapeze and in peculiar ladder exercises of great originality.”<sup>77</sup> A double-sided Cole Brothers herald listed Clark as “The Aerial Queen.”

Then, on the evening of September 6, 1906, Eva Clark was shot after the Cole Brothers show in Staunton, Virginia. The first coverage on September 7 by the *Staunton Daily Leader* stated that Clark was “shot at the hands of James Richards.”<sup>78</sup> The *Staunton Daily Leader* reported:

After the show, Mrs. Clarke [sic], while in one of the dressing apartments was accosted by Richards, who had been drinking, and was abused by him. Richards insulted her and was treating her roughly when her husband appeared upon the scene. Clarke [sic.] at once interfered and a scuffle ensued when Mrs. Clark stepped between the two men one of whom was flourishing a pistol. In the mele [sic] the weapon was discharged and the woman received a severe wound in the abdomen...the intestines were



perforated sixteen times, one hole being found in the bladder.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the inconsistencies of names noted earlier in the article, the newspaper coverage of Eva's shooting over the next few weeks contributed heavily to the uncertainty and continued mystery surrounding her death. Six articles were published on September 8, each telling a slightly different version of the shooting story. *The Alexandria Gazette* stated that "Mrs. J. T. Clark" was shot by "James Richardson" and that her husband "Clarke" was later arrested at the hospital but escaped.<sup>9</sup> The *Atlanta Constitution* front page stated that "Mrs. L. B. Clark" was shot accidentally by her husband, who "disappeared after the shooting."<sup>16</sup>

However, it was the *Staunton Dispatch* that scooped the other news sources, securing brand new biographical information about Eva from none other than her brother-in-law, Lum's brother A. T. "Allie" Clark, who worked in the Clark family shows and business. The articles and subsequent coverage never specified why or how Allie Clark showed up in Staunton so quickly after the shooting, but the *Dispatch* article stated

He is a pleasant gentleman and spoke very freely about the affair. In a conversation with the writer at this office last night he stated he thought his brother was here and was surprised to learn that he was not. He wishes his brother to surrender and take the consequences. The shooting as he learned it from his brother, and from Richards, was accidental. His brother and Richards had a little difficulty and his brother threw out his hand with the revolver in it to ward off a blow from Richards and the gun went off without his intending it, the ball striking his wife who was standing to one side.<sup>7</sup>

In the same article, Allie Clark revealed that "Richards and Mrs. Clark were orphans who were brought up by the elder Clark just as his own children. They have all been together most of the time all their lives. Richards is a trapeze performer, as is also Mrs. Clark, while the latter's husband is a ticket seller with the show."<sup>7</sup> This is the first recorded instance of a familial link, albeit an adoptive one, between Eva Clark, James Richards, and the W. C. Clark family. In a 2019 interview with Morris Simon, great grandnephew to Lum Clark, he stated

Eva and her 'brother' ... were apparently unrelated runaway children 'adopted' by Lum's father Wiley during the older show's tour of the Midwest. It was common for local children to join traveling circuses, and for the owners of the circus to take them into their 'family' perhaps to avoid legal complications as they moved from town to town with unrelated minors in their shows.<sup>78</sup>

This is consistent with Allie Clark's *Dispatch* interview



*The Cincinnati Post* ran this photo of Eva Clark on October 4, 1906 beside an article titled "Police Hold Cincy Girl's Body."

*The Cincinnati Post*

but leaves lingering questions when compared to other facts. Research not only shows that Eva Clark was not an orphan, but that she performed often with her mother, Alice Howard (later Alice Adair after she re-married). Other documentation shows that Eva likely met James Richards for the first time during their overlap in Price's Floating Opera Co. from 1893-1894. It is also known from the *Clipper* blurbs at that time that Richards had left the W. C. Clark Shows where he

was listed on the roster in 1892. Richards was noted as an aerial artist in Rice's [sic.] Floating Opera,<sup>79</sup> which lines up with Allie's interview. It is likely that Richards re-joined the Clark Shows after performing with Price's Floating Opera Co. and Eva followed him, subsequently getting "adopted" by the elder Clark in order to carry the young performers over state lines, as noted by Simon. Research shows Eva worked with Clark Shows in 1897, and she married Lum Clark later that year. Allie's story adds a distinct layer of complexity to the shooting case, and re-affirms that it was accidental, something Eva swore until her death.

Over the next few weeks in 1906, the newspaper coverage stated that "physicians now believe that she will recover unless unforeseen complications set in,"<sup>80</sup> and that authorities could not find Lum Clark or James Richards. On October 1, 1906, Eva Clark died after complications with a second surgery. Additionally, the *Staunton Daily Leader* reported that Lum Clark sent a telegram from Mexico after fleeing the country.<sup>19</sup> Eva's funeral was the last of the immediate local coverage in 1906. However, over 400 miles away in Cincinnati, Ohio, she was remembered in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* with coverage that mentioned more about her life and career

than offered in the Staunton papers. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* noted that she was "better known as Eva Howard" and that she was "from Cincinnati." The article also stated that "she appeared at the Commodore before it passed out of existence, and was so well thought of by Edward Brannigan, the proprietor, that he took her to his home on Price Hill, as she was penniless," and that the Brannigans were en route to Staunton with hopes of bringing Eva's body back to Cincinnati for burial. The article ended with the ominous sentence "Clark loved his wife devotedly, but when his jealousy was excited was prone to make implied threats," which likely invoked the 1903 divorce petitions.<sup>11</sup>

The October 4 *Cincinnati Post* article about Eva's death ran under the only known, confirmed photograph of the aerial artist. The photo shows Eva in a vignette with her name, "Miss Eva Clark," printed directly below and is available in the bound collection at the Cincinnati Public Library. Finally, *Billboard* announced Eva's death and reiterated that she was in Cole Bros. Show, Robinson Show, and performed at the "old Commodore Concert Hall in Cincinnati and was a favorite there."<sup>17</sup> The Brannigans were not allowed to take Eva's body back to Cincinnati while the investigation was



This damaged print provides a portrait of W. C. Clark's family in the mid-1890s. Back row left to right: Lum (Eva's future husband), Lonnie, Willie and Allie. Front row left to right: Ruby, Wiley, Addie and Pearl.

Morris Simon collection



still open, and she was interred in Thornrose Cemetery in Staunton in an unmarked grave.

Mentioned previously, over the next century Eva's story grew and became an essential part of the local lore in Staunton, Virginia; she was prominently featured on ghost tours and in performance pieces, such as the previously quoted Augusta Annals. However, a substantial amount of the coverage focused on Eva's tragic death and the uncertain circumstances surrounding it. Her career was mentioned only as a "trapeze artist" or "aerial performer," and the only biographical details included in the articles were pulled from coverage at the time of the shooting, much re-told from Allie Clark's interview and point of view. The once vibrant performer was slowly, over time, reduced to a victim, known more for her death than the forgotten legacy of her life.

### Lum Clark: Life in Two Parts

When expanding upon the story and biography of Eva Clark, it is impossible to disassociate her completely from her husband, Lum Clark. Their timelines and careers overlapped substantially and supporting articles regarding their relationship help to shed light on what was likely a complicated union.

Joseph Columbia "Lum Roser" Clark was born on May 7, 1877, in Burleson County, Texas. His father, Wiley Coleman "W. C." Clark, was a founding member and manager of the Clark Bros. wagon show, known "as the largest show of its kind."<sup>81</sup> Lum was the third eldest son, after Allie and Willie Clark, and had a younger brother, Lonnie.<sup>87</sup> An early mention of Lum in the press described him as "the fifteen year old son of W. C. Clark, who works the trained elephant, Empress, to the advantage" with Clark Bros. Circus.<sup>82</sup> Clark's apparent talent and care for working with animals would be evident in the second half of his life. Additionally, it is important to note that both Wiley (W. C.) Clark and his brother, M. L. Clark, were proprietors of many shows over the years, including M. L. Clark's Oriental Circus and Clark & Sons.<sup>83</sup>

In 1896, Lum Clark was accused of robbing a residence using the aliases "Columbus Harding" and "Cotton Harding" in *The Washington Times*, a Washington D.C. newspaper. A judge dismissed the case due to insufficient evidence.<sup>84</sup> As explained by Lum's great grandnephew, Morris Simon, via interview:

W. C. Clark's four sons toured as the 'Clark Brothers' Circus' with its headquarters in Tuscaloosa, Alabama...As the owners of their show, the brothers lived in a boarding house...In 1896, 22-year-old Allie and 19 year-old Lum were competing for the favors of Miss Emma Lee Garner, the granddaughter of their hostess, Amanda. I believe from studying the chronology of my family that Eva Howard and James Richards were both living with

the Clark Brothers' Circus at this time.<sup>87</sup>

This chronology appears accurate, as Lum Clark is linked with Eva Clark for the first time in the press the following year; Lum Clark is noted as being back with W. C. Clark's Shows in Tuscaloosa,<sup>85</sup> and "Eva Howard" is listed in *The Tuscaloosa Gazette* as being engaged for the season with the same show. Then, at the end of the year, Lum Clark and Eva Howard married in Troup County, Georgia, when Lum was 20 years old.<sup>86</sup>

Though the end of 1897 brought a celebration of marriage for Lum, earlier events that year were less positive. In August, a story in *The Daily Leader* from Lexington, Kentucky detailed the murder of William "Bill" Miller in Cumberland Gap, Tennessee on August 13, stating that he "was shot to death by some unknown person. It was just after the night's performance of W. C. Clark & Co's circus, and at first it was supposed that Miller had met his death at the hands of one of the showmen."<sup>86</sup> Miller's murder was immediately called mysterious, as he was the principal deponent in another high-profile murder case. Miller was the owner of Cave Spring distillery.<sup>87</sup> Though initial reports did not name Lum Clark as the assailant, the coroner's verdict in *The Journal and Tribune* from Knoxville on August 14 stated "The proof showed that Ross Clark, brother of W. M. Clark, fired the fatal shot and ran into the mountains... Ross Clark, who did the shooting, is twenty years of age, five feet seven, weight about one hundred and forty pounds, red face and hair, blue eyes."<sup>88</sup> From this it is likely that "Ross" is Lum Clark, and he was using his frequent alias "Roser." Additionally, the age lines up with Lum Clark's year of birth, and "W. M. Clark" was Lum's brother, Willie. On August 20, *The Wilmington Messenger* reported that "William Miller tried to force his way into Clark's circus at Cumberland Gap, Tenn., and was killed by the proprietor's son."<sup>89</sup>

Though reports of the shooting were inconsistent with names, on June 14, 1899, *The Indianapolis News* ran an article titled "The Arrest of Joseph Clark," which stated the following:

Joseph Clark, alias Lum Clark, alias Joe Rosser, arrested yesterday afternoon by detectives Garber and Morgan of Indianapolis, is wanted at Cumberland Gap, Tenn., for the murder of William Miller, a distiller of that place, two years ago. Clark's father is the owner of a traveling circus, which was exhibiting at Cumberland Gap at the time Miller was killed. The authorities in Tennessee have been notified, and Clark will be held until they can be heard from. Clark is also accused of killing a colored man at Cairo, Ill., about six months ago. Clark claims that he was here in search of a man who had eloped with his wife. He was heavily armed at the time of arrest.<sup>90</sup>



Lum Clark and his second wife Eugenia Ricaud attended the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition and honeymooned in Seattle in 1909, the year after they were married.

Morris Simon collection

Additional information about the court case or trial is not available in the public domain, nor has any supplemental information about the accused killing in Cairo been located. Lum Clark was not in the papers again until 1902, when linked with Eva as “Mr. and Mrs. Clarke [sic.] (Eva Howard),” who were noted as joining Sells & Downs for the upcoming season.<sup>53</sup>

As noted in Eva Clark’s biographical sketch, on May 30, 1903, two divorce petition notices appeared in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*.<sup>56</sup> The language used in the second of these notices added to the mounting evidence of Lum Clark’s violent behavior and may suggest that Eva and Lum were estranged long before the divorce notices were filed, given the report about the killing in Cairo in 1898-99.

It is unknown whether Lum and Eva officially divorced, but in 1906 she was again using the surname “Clark” during her time with Cole Bros. Circus. It is also unknown whether Lum was present the night of her death in Staunton, Virginia as a Cole Bros. employee or as Eva’s estranged husband.<sup>87</sup> After the shooting, and into current times, Lum Clark’s story has also remained largely untold in Staunton, thereby furthering the mystery of Eva Clark’s death. As late as 2014, news coverage and members of the local historical society

continue to perpetuate the story that Lum Clark “disappeared from the circus and was never seen again.”<sup>28</sup> Though it is true that Lum fled to Mexico after the shooting, and that Eva’s death and his flight were the major factors in the new Clark Brothers Show shutting down, he did not leave the circus life nor did he remain in Mexico for long.<sup>87</sup>

Lum returned to the United States after approximately a year in exile and rejoined his siblings in Louisiana, uniting with them in his uncle, M. L. Clark’s, show.<sup>87</sup> There, he met and married a young Louisiana French woman, Eugenia Ricaud, in 1908. Ricaud, who was referred to in the family as “Aunt Curlie,”<sup>92</sup> was 20 at the time of her marriage to Clark. She was also the older sister of Lum’s brother, Willie’s wife, Angelic. Lum and Eugenia’s marriage certificate is available in the Arkansas County Marriages Index from 1908.<sup>91</sup> During one of his interviews for this article, Morris Simon shared the honeymoon photo of Clark and Ricaud at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909. Simon also noted the striking physical similarity of Ricaud to Eva Clark.<sup>87</sup>

“L. R. Clark” (Lum) was mentioned in an advertisement in *Billboard* in 1908 for the L. R. Clark Combined Shows.<sup>92</sup> His name appeared in a newspaper again in 1909 when Allie Clark purchased the Greater Electric theatre outfit and employed Lum to take charge.<sup>93</sup> He was again mentioned in print in 1932 when a gorilla in his animal farm freed a “python from its cage and dragged it back to the gorilla [sic.] pen where the fight took place.” Eugenia Clark was also mentioned in the article.<sup>94</sup> The gorilla story was also picked up by the *Tyrone Daily Herald*<sup>95</sup> and *New Castle News*<sup>96</sup> in Pennsylvania.

Lum and Eugenia had two children, Pearl and Johnny,<sup>87</sup> who are shown in two photos, dated c.1916 and 1918, from Morris Simon’s collection and family Bible. *Bandwagon*, in a 1965 issue that details the M. L. Clark Wagon Show, mentions an incident in the early 1920s associated with Lum, stating:

In the early 1920’s Lum Clark was working on the show as a “patch” (fixer) and ran into some trouble, in a little town near Lexington, Kentucky. A townner was helping raise the center poles when a guy line snapped causing the pole to fall while the man still had it on his shoulder. He was pushed to the ground and the pole broke his neck, killing him. The young man’s father happened to be on the lot at the time. M. L. told Lum to get the father and keep him away from a lawyer, who would surely bring a plaster service. Accordingly Lum found the father and took him off in a rig to Lexington and bought him a suit of clothes and then proceeded to make the rounds of local saloons. However Lum got drunk and lost the man, who contacted a mouth-piece at once.<sup>97</sup>

Lum eventually retired from circuses and returned to



Alabama, settling in Tuscaloosa with two aged baboons that he saved from being euthanized. He died in 1936 at age 59 and is buried in Tuscaloosa Memorial Park. In his interview, Simon also explained that Lum's long-time nickname, "Roser," appears on his cemetery marker, abbreviated as "R."<sup>98</sup>

Before the shooting in 1906, Lum Clark was mentioned more frequently in the press than after returning to the United States in 1907-1908. As noted in the newspaper coverage quoted above, Clark had a clear pattern of behavior for breaking the law and committing violent acts before Eva's shooting. His relationship with Eva was complex, seemingly starting in an adoptive familial way, and then growing to marriage and later divorce or estrangement, culminating in the fateful night in 1906. As summarized by *The Cincinnati Enquirer* after Eva's shooting, "Clark loved his wife devotedly, but when his jealousy was excited was prone to make implied threats."<sup>13</sup>

It is unlikely that researchers will ever uncover the full truth about what happened in that dressing room in Staunton in 1906, specifically if Lum Clark was involved in the shooting. However, research and interviews show that after the shooting and his exile to Mexico, Lum returned to the United States and raised a family while working within the circus and entertainment industries. He was not a fugitive for the rest of his life, "never to be seen again,"<sup>28</sup> as perpetuated in modern coverage. Clark was undoubtedly a complicated man with a record of crime and violence, who led a life mostly out of the public eye after the shooting, up until his death. Both periods of Lum Clark's life are important to the collective memory and to Eva's story.

## Conclusion

There is still much to uncover about Eva Clark and Lum Clark. Their current legacies within the collective memory of Staunton, Virginia are limited, but are still the subjects of profound, continued interest. Through ghost tours, regional



A family photo of Lum and Eugenia Clark and their children, c.1916.

Morris Simon collection

storytelling, and dramatized narratives, Eva Clark and Lum Clark have been caught in the space between an incomplete reality and local lore. However, it is that local lore that has kept their story alive.

The life and biography of Eva Clark, and, by association, Lum Clark, will only be enhanced and become more vibrant with the addition of new details. Eva, especially, has been an illusory ghost caught in the collective memory long enough. It is time to commemorate the full and rightful legacy of this once-renowned and highly-talented performer.

## Acknowledgements

This article is the culmination of over a decade of research and would not have been possible without the significant research contributions of Dawn Tucker, whose curiosity and determination to uncover the truth about Eva Clark's life inspired me to keep digging.

Additionally, I am grateful to Morris Simon, William Mays of the *National Police*

*Gazette*, Peter Shrake of Circus World Museum's Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Staunton Public Library, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Laura Wilson, Dustin Fosness, and Bryant Mangum. Finally, I am thankful that Staunton, Virginia, my hometown, kept Eva's story alive.

## Information Request

New information about Eva Clark and Lum Clark is continually added to databases and the public domain. It is clear that more information will be available in the future, and part two of this article is already in progress. If you have any information, ephemera, photographs, articles, or oral histories that might further the research of this article, please consider sharing it with Aíne Norris via [ainemnorris@gmail.com](mailto:ainemnorris@gmail.com). **BW**

**Editor's note:** The author has used the MLA writing format for this article and its Endnotes, and generally only a few changes to this style have been made for publication in Bandwagon.



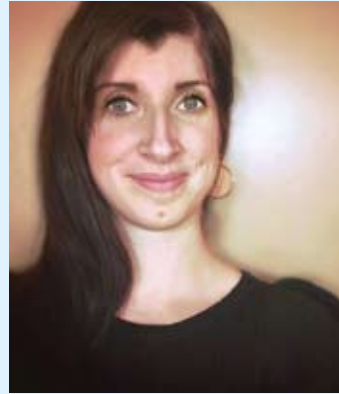
Lum Clark's gravestone in Tuscaloosa Memorial Park, Alabama FindaGrave.com

## Endnotes

1. For the purpose of this article, aside from contextual changes or direct quotes, "Eva Clark" will be used for consistency, as that is the performer's last known name.
2. The author acknowledges that other aerialists have since been called the "Queen of the Air," but Clark was one of the early recipients of that moniker and it is part of her story.
3. "Circus Woman May Succumb." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 7 Sep 1906, p. 1.
4. "Succumbs to Her Wounds." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 2 Oct 1906, p.1.
5. "Circus Folk Mark Grave of Eva Clark." *The News Leader*, 14 Sep 1923, p. 1.
6. "Woman Peacemaker Shot." *Washington Post*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 10.
7. "The Shooting Case." *Staunton Dispatch*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 1.
8. "Shooting Yet Unexplained." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 1.
9. "Actress Shot." *Alexandria Gazette*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 2.
10. "Mrs. Clark Still in Dangerous Condition." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 10 Sep 1906, p. 1.
11. "Bullet Ends Eva Clark's Life." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 3 Oct 1906, p. 8.
12. "Tragedy at a Circus." *The Baltimore Sun*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 11.
13. "Husband's Disappearance." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 5 Oct 1906, p. 12.
14. "Young Circus Actress Shot by Husband Dies." *The Times Dispatch*, 3 Oct 1906, p. 5.
15. "Bullet Fatal; Husband is Missing." *Kentucky Post*, 3 Oct 1906, p. 2.
16. "Woman Circus Performer Was Shot." *The Atlanta Constitution*, 8 Sep 1906, p. 1.
17. "Eva Clark Is Dead." *Billboard*, 13 Oct 1906, p. 26.
18. "Fair Aerialist Is Still in Danger." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 28 Sep 1906, p. 1.
19. "Clark Wanted Here; Far Off in Mexico." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 1 Oct 1906, p. 1.
20. Browne, Ray and Browne, Pat, editors. *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*. 172, Popular Press, 2001.
21. "Circus Folk Hold Service in Memory of Eva Clark, Troupers Whose Life Tragedy Ended Here." *Staunton News Leader*, 22 Apr 1931, p. 1.
22. "Eva Clark." *The White Tops*, Sep 1959, vol. 32, no. 5., p. 20.
23. "Grave still marked at Christmas." *The News Leader*, 26 Dec 1977, p. 29.
24. "Letters to the editor." *News Leader*, 30 Aug 1983, p. 4.
25. "Circus girl lingered in death." *The News Leader*, 27 Feb 1999, p. 5.
26. The author knows who places the annual wreath due to investigation by researcher Dawn Tucker, but both have been asked not to publicly identify the sender.

## About the Author

Aine Murphy Norris grew up in Staunton, Virginia, and received her M.A. in English with a concentration in research from Virginia Commonwealth University. She teaches composition and American literature at Pensacola State College in Pensacola, Florida. Her research primarily explores the lives of forgotten or misrepresented women in literature and American history.



27. "Circus performer buried at Thornrose after tragic death." *Augusta Annals*, Summer 2008, Vol. 14, Issue 2, p. 7.
28. "Visiting circus honors aerial artist killed in 1906." *The News Leader*, 3 Sep 2014, p. A1/A8.
29. "The Clements & Russell Railroad Show." *New York Clipper*, 5 May 1888, p. 123.
30. "Notes from Chas." *New York Clipper*, 7 Jun 1890, p. 198.
31. Though it is unconfirmed that this mention is Eva Clark, it is a possibility given her parents' names. Additionally, research has not provided a definitive middle name for Clark, and "May" is a possibility.
32. "Roster of McFadden's Amusement Enterprise and Pavilion Shows." *New York Clipper*, 11 May 1889, p. 138.
33. "Under the White Tents." *New York Clipper*, 7 Sep 1889, p. 427.
34. "Vaudeville, Minstrel and Circus." *New York Clipper*, 10 Jan 1891, p. 702.
35. "Roster of Clemens' European Shows." *New York Clipper*, 16 May 1891, p. 169.
36. "Variety, Minstrel and Circus." *New York Clipper*, 19 Dec 1891, p. 683.
37. "New York Clipper Excerpts 1890s." *Classic.circushistory.org*. N. p., 2020. Web. 14 May 2020.
38. "Joe and Hattie Richards." *New York Clipper*, 29 Apr 1893, p. 119.
39. "Notes from Price's Floating Opera." *New York Clipper*, 30 Dec 1893, p. 688.
40. "May 5." *New York Clipper*, 20 May 1893, p. 164.
41. "Notes from Price's Floating Opera." *New York Clipper*, 6 Jan 1894, p. 711.
42. "Notes from W. C. Clark's Shows." *Classic.circushistory.org*. N. p., 2020. Web.
43. "Band." *The Tuscaloosa Gazette*, 4 Mar 1897, p. 3.
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45. "W. C. Clark's United Shows Notes." *New York Clipper*, 2 Apr 1898, p.77.
46. "Local News." *The Hocking Sentinel*, 25 May 1899, p. 4.
47. John Robinson's 10 Big Shows Season of 1900 Route Book. 1900. Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center. Circus World Museum.
48. "Roster of Dr. Fretwell's Floating Palace." *New York Clipper*, 31 Mar 1900, p. 104.
49. "Robinson's Roster." *Billboard*, 2 Mar 1901, p. 7.
50. "Sells & Downs' Notes." *New York Clipper*, 1 Nov 1902, p. 787.
51. "The Carnival." *The Newberry Herald and News*, 2 Jan 1903, p. 3.
52. "New Suits Filed." *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 30 May 1903, p. 16.
53. "Eva Clark." *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 30 May 1903, p. 16.



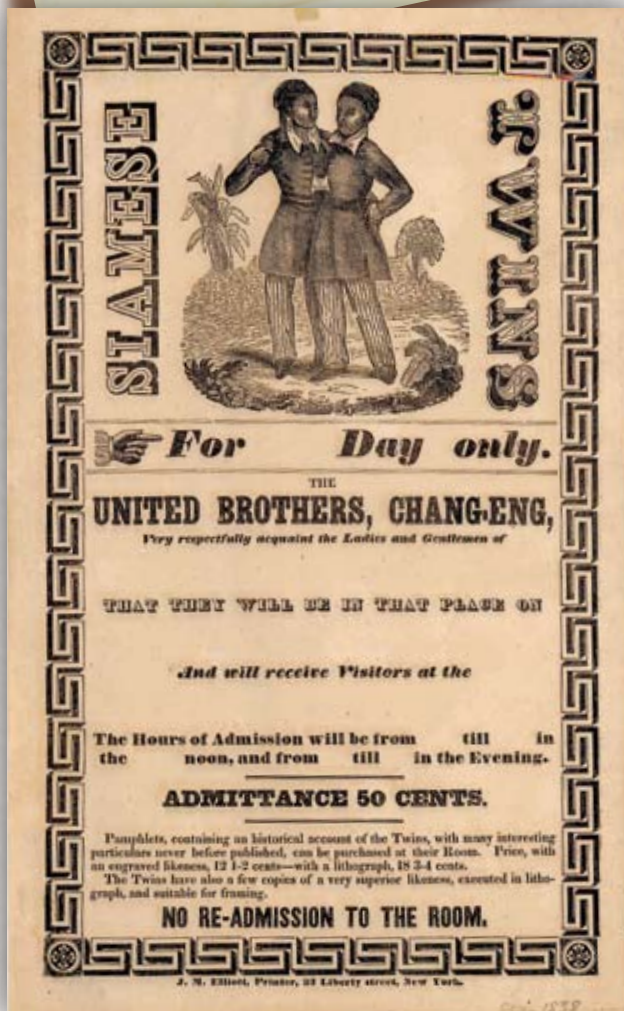
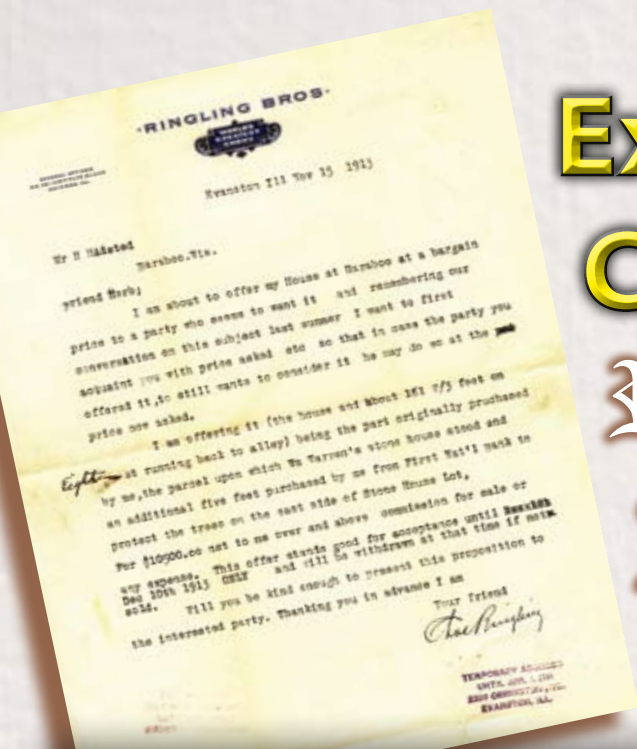
54. "New Suits Filed." *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, 30 May 1903, p. 7.
55. The performer would be linked again to the Commodore after her death, when the proprietor, Mr. Brannigan, and his wife, traveled to Staunton in hopes of retrieving her body to bury in Cincinnati.
56. "Ohio: Cincinnati." *New York Clipper*, 25 Jul 1903, p. 505.
57. "Miss Eva." *Dayton Daily News*, 15 Aug 1903, p. 11. Additionally, this was the first known instance of the nickname "the queen of the air," which would follow the artist for the rest of her career.
58. "A Crush at Fairview." *The Dayton Herald*, 18 Aug 1903, p. 5.
59. "At the Theaters." *Dayton Daily News*, 19 Aug 1903, p. 8.
60. "A Splendid Line of Novelties at Fairview Park This Evening." *The Dayton Herald*, 19 Aug 1903, p. 5.
61. "Great Company." *Dayton Daily News*, 26 Sep 1903, p. 9.
62. "Eva Howard." *National Police Gazette* (1845-1906), 28 Nov 1903, 83.1372, p. 4.
63. "Isle of Spice." *Billboard*, 1 Jan 1904, p. 3.
64. "Interesting News Items Picked Up Throughout the Theatrical Field." *National Police Gazette* (1845-1906), 13 Feb 1904, 84.1383, p. 2.
65. "Eva Howard." *Billboard*, 9 Apr 1904, p. 4.
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67. "With a Horsewhip." *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 10 Jun 1904, p. 9.
68. "Miss Eva Howard." *Billboard*, 28 Jan 1905, p. 20.
69. "Roster of Geo. S. Ely's United Shows and Trained Animal Exhibition." *New York Clipper*, 15 Apr 1905, p. 205.
70. "Kansas." *New York Clipper*, 13 May 1905, p. 308.
71. "Sells and Downs Circus Is Here." *Newark Advocate*, 8 Aug 1905, p. 8.
72. "Circus Coming Tomorrow." *The Gazette Quebec*, 29 Jun 1905, p. 4.
73. "Big Crowd Came to See a Big Circus." *Pittston Gazette*, 26 Jul 1905, p. 3.
74. "Sells and Downs Circus Is Here." *Newark Advocate*, 8 Aug 1905, p. 8.
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76. "Circus More Than Pleases People." *Daily News-Democrat*, 22 May 1906, p. 1.
77. Tent City Chatter multipage courier of Cole Brothers Circus, spring 1906. Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center. Circus World Museum.
78. Simon, Morris. Personal interview. 27 Feb 2019.
79. "Rice's Floating Opera." *New York Clipper*, 1 Jul 1893, p. 264.
80. "Physicians Think Mrs. Clark Will Recover." *Staunton Daily Leader*, 13 Sep 1906, p. 1.
81. "Wiley Coleman 'W.C.' Clark (1845-1899). *Findagrave.com*, N. p., 1845. Web.
82. "From Clark Bros. Circus." *New York Clipper*, 23 May 1891, p. 182.
83. Simon, Morris. Personal interview. 28 May 2020.
84. "No Evidence to Hold Them." *Washington Times*, 10 Apr 1896, p. 6.
85. "Notes from W. C. Clark's Shows." *Classic.circushistory.org*. N. p., 2020. Web.
86. "Killing." *The Daily Leader*, 13 Aug 1897, p. 2.
87. "A Bullet Overtakes Witness Bill Miller At Cumberland Gap." *The Courier-Journal*, 13 Aug 1897, p. 1.
88. "Tenth Was Fatal." *The Journal and Tribune*, 14 Aug 1897, p. 1.
89. --. *The Wilmington Messenger*, 20 Aug 1897, p. 3.
90. --. *The Indianapolis News*, 14 Jun 1899, p. 7.
91. Certificate of Marriage, L R Clark to Eugenie Ricanda. 9 Mar 1908, Hempstead County, Arkansas. Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837-1957.
92. "Wanted for L. R. Clark's Combined Shows." *Billboard*, 22 Aug 1908, p. 23.
93. "Greater Electric Changes Hand." *The Tuscaloosa News*, 12 Jan 1909, p. 4.
94. "Gorilla Victor In Death Battle With Big Python." *The Morning Star*, 5 May 1932, p. 7.
95. "Gorilla Kills Python in Fierce Battle." *Tyrone Daily Herald*, 4 Jun 1932, p. 3.
96. "Gorilla Kills Python In Fierce Battle." *New Castle News*, 7 Jul 1932, p. 15.
97. Walton, Homer C. "The M. L. Clark Wagon Show." *Bandwagon*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Mar-Apr), 1965, pp. 4-11.
98. Joseph Columbia "Lum Roser" Clark (1877-1936) - .... *Findagrave.com*. N. p., 1877. Web.



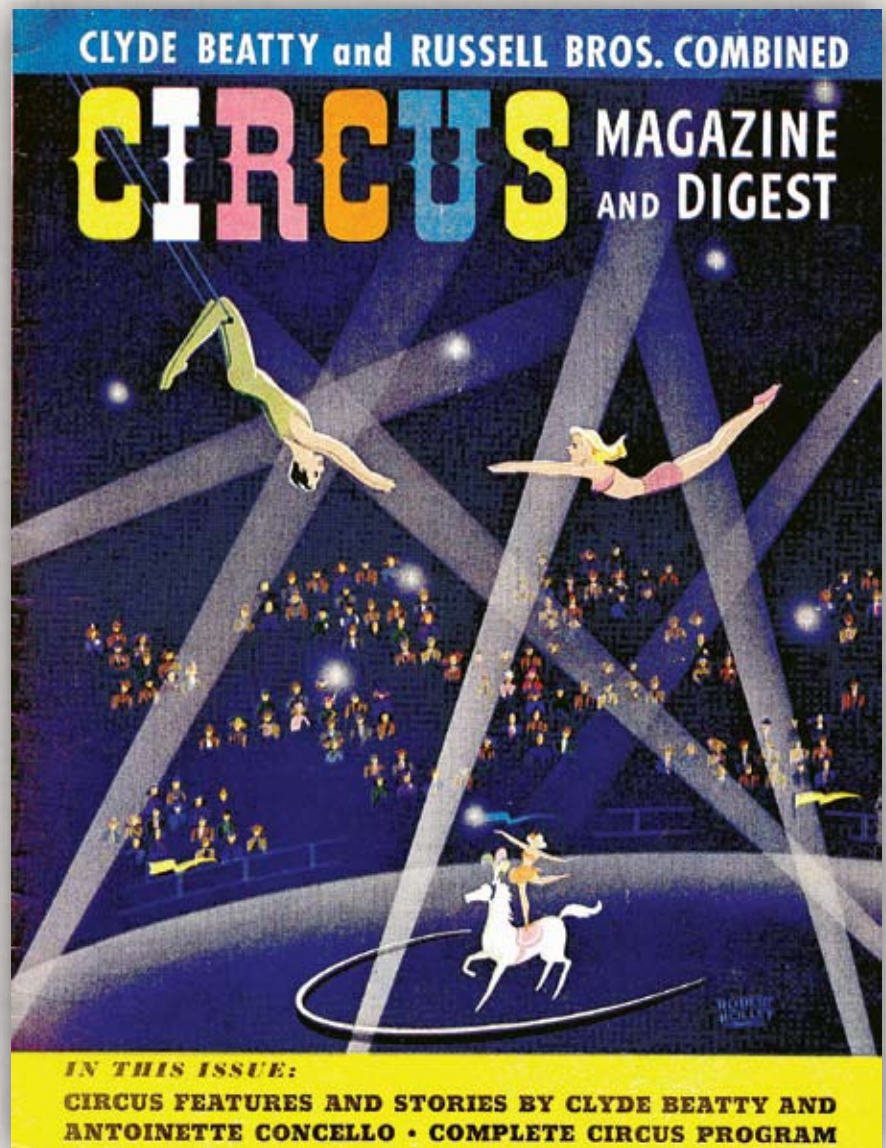
Staunton is a charming town located in northcentral Virginia with a population of about 25,000.



# Exploring the Circus Archives of Ralph D. and Joan M. Pierce



The legendary conjoined twin brothers who were born in Siam (modern-day Thailand) were promoted with this c.1838 handbill. Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874) first arrived in the United States in 1829.



Commercial artist Robert Holley (1913-1977) painted a dramatic scene for the cover of the 1944 Clyde Beatty and Russell Bros. Circus program.





Heritage Bros. toured during the single season of 1926.



*Sitting Bull (c.1831-1890) is remembered today for leading Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warriors against General George Custer's cavalry at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1867. The eminent Native American appeared with Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1885.*

# FRIDAY SEPT. 21

FRANKLIN

## GENTRY BROS. CIRCUS



*This exceptional 1928 window card was printed by Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co.*

Ralph Pierce visited his first circus in 1959 when Cristiani Bros. played in his hometown of Baraboo, and collecting circus materials soon became a passion. During the 1960s, Paul Luckey and Bob Parkinson counseled Ralph as they were developing exhibits and establishing the first Circus World Museum library in a small building on the former Ringling Car Shops property. As a young man Ralph often assisted in the library and his interest continued to grow, as did his collection. Consequently, over the past six decades Ralph has accumulated an archive of thousands of historical circus items.





*Al Ringling already sported his famous mustache when he and his brothers toured with their wagon show in the 1880s.*



*Al's wife, Elize "Lou" Morris Ringling, was a central figure with the brothers' circus during its early years.*



*This postcard view inside the Ringling Ring Barn shows the south end of the building where riding acts practiced. The pole in the center supported the arm of the safety mechanic used during the training of bareback riders.*

For Ralph and Joan Pierce the history of the circus has come to life through their collection. Since Ralph first became interested more than 60 years ago his interest in preserving circus history has taken him from coast to coast, and across the Atlantic. Ralph notes that his study of circus history has been both rewarding and led to friendships around the world.

In these pages, Ralph Pierce shares with *Bandwagon* readers many of the treasures of the collection he and Joan have assembled over the past 60 years. **BW**





The photograph used for this rare postcard was taken from the top of a box car looking east southeast with the Baraboo Roundhouse and water tank in the background. The loading of the Ringling elephants was the primary focus. Icicles on the elephant cars suggest that this was an early spring loadout prior to the season's first dates.



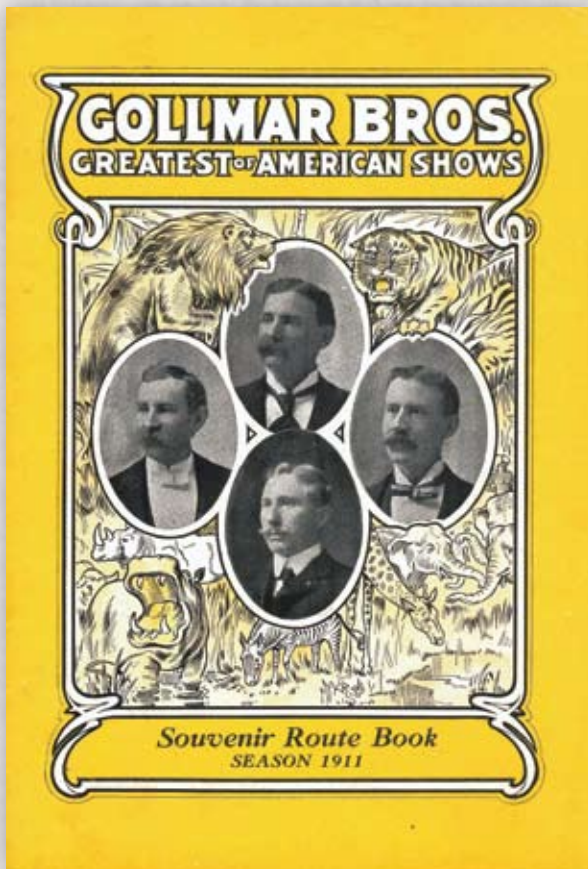
Ten winter quarters buildings in Ringlingville are visible in this 1910 Real Photo Post Card vista from across the Baraboo River. Left to right: part of the roof of the 1888 Hippodrome and Training School, the pre-1904 Paint Shop along the riverbank, the house that would begin to serve as the Ringling Office c.1913, the 1888 Animal House (later the Wardrobe and Harness Shop), the 1901 Animal House, the c.1897 Wagon Storage House on the riverbank, the 1897 Elephant House, the 1901 Ring Barn, c.1901 Small Wagon Shop and the c.1901 Carpenter Shop & Painting Building. The two-pier Ringling footbridge seen at the left provided access to the railroad yards across the river.



## Gollmar Bros.



The Gollmars were first cousins of the Ringlings. Their circus is seen here during its inaugural season of 1891. Note the two goats on a small cart in center of the image.



Gollmar Bros. only printed four route books. This was the second in 1911.

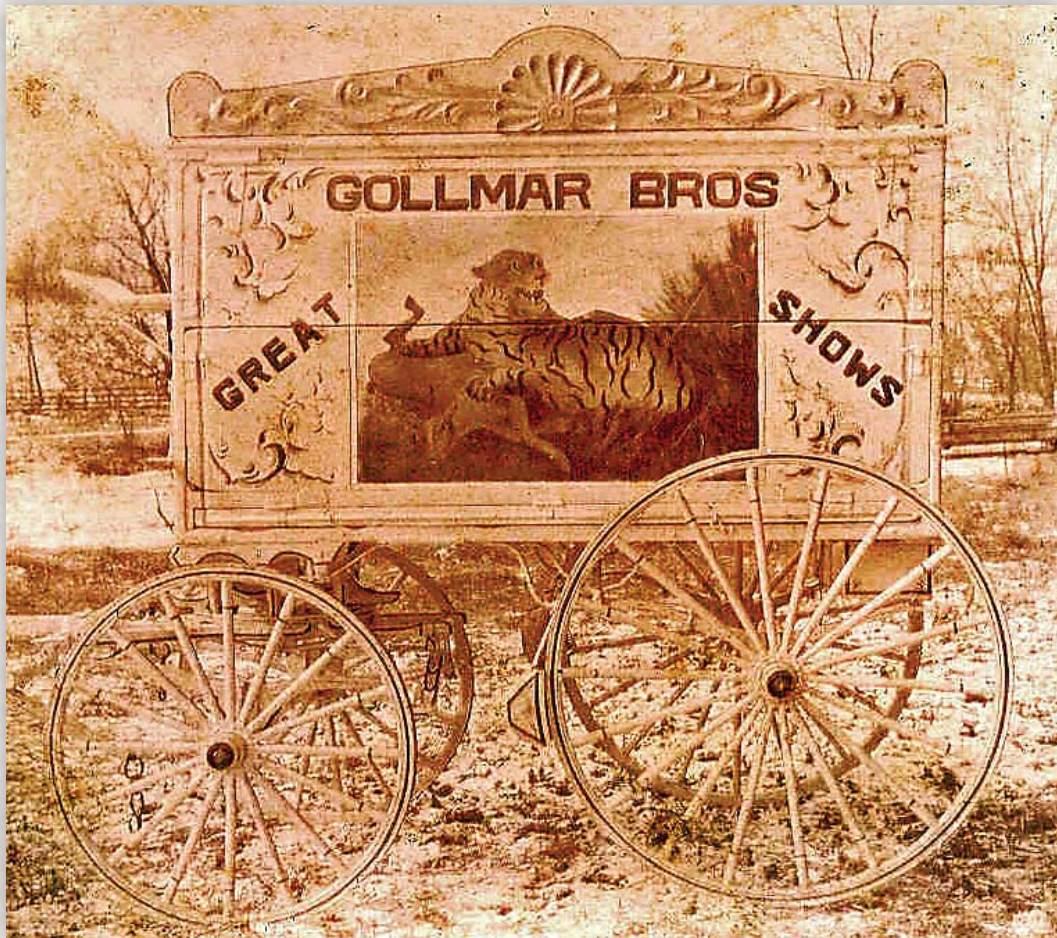
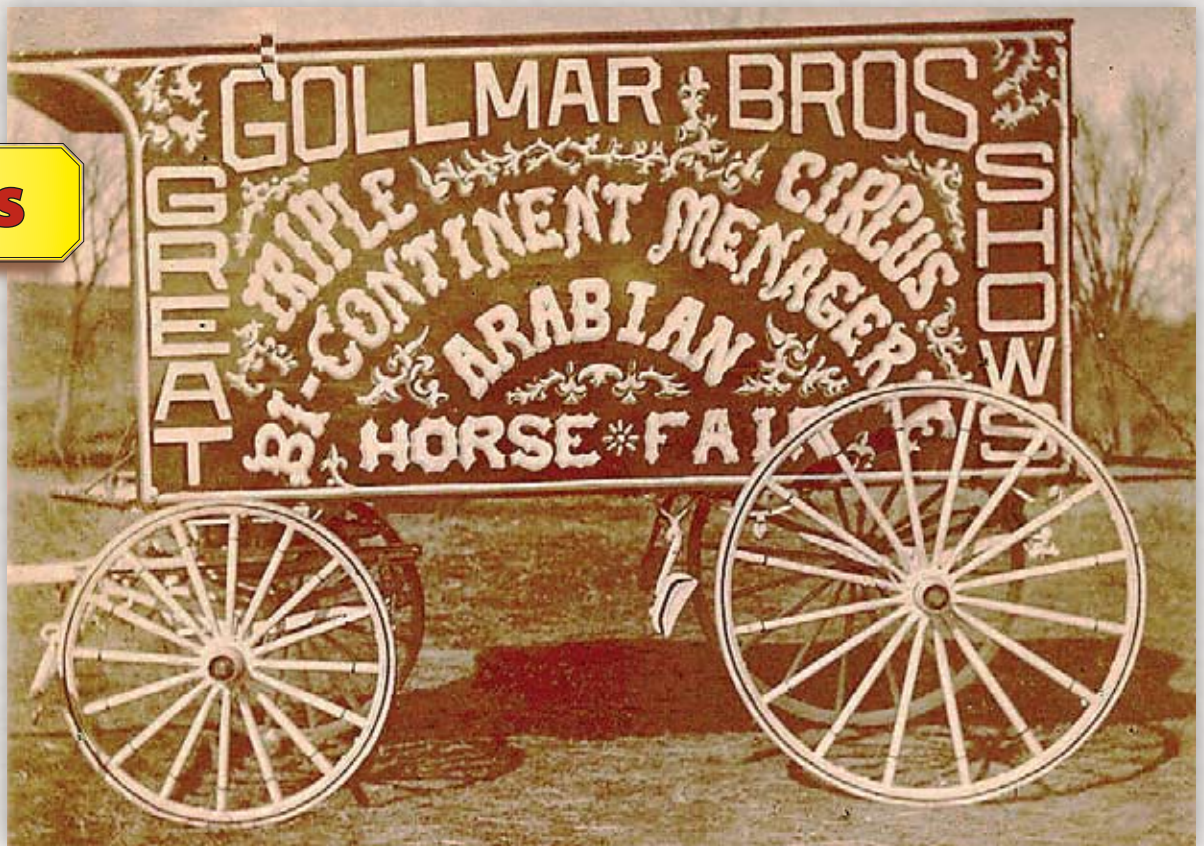


This program and song book dates from 1922. That year the Gollmar title was leased to the American Circus Corporation.



## Treasures

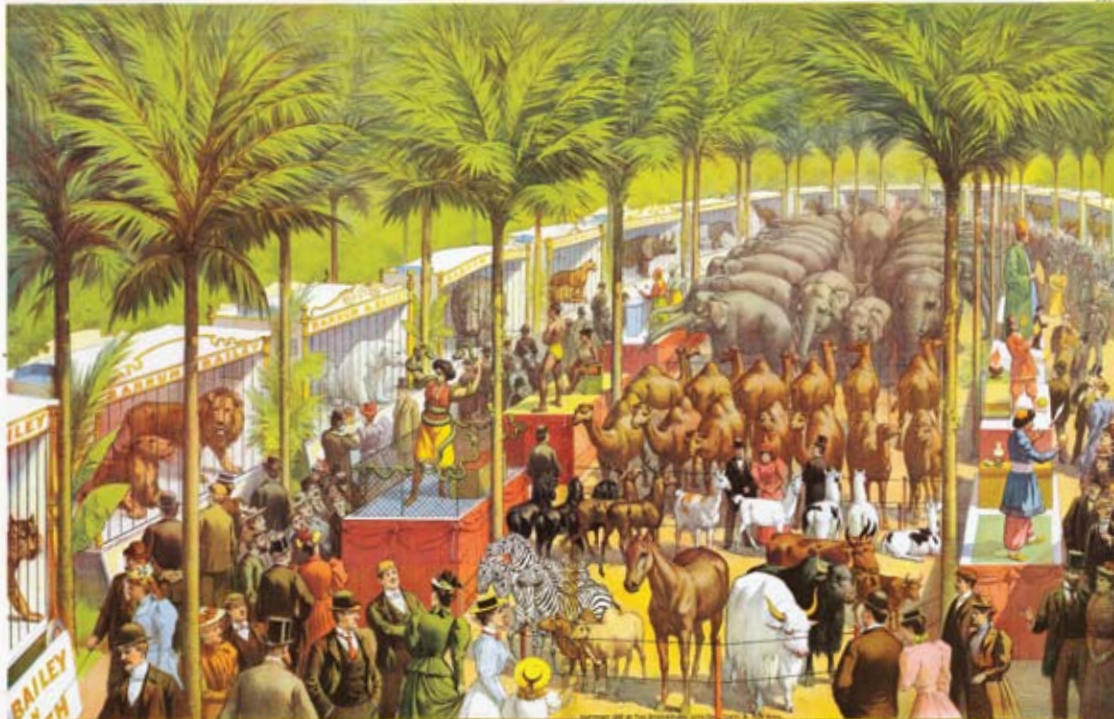
*The Pierce collection includes many photographs of Gollmar Bros. equipment from its mud show days. The Baraboo circus went on rails in 1903.*



*This diminutive tiger cage dates from the overland wagon show era. It was photographed at the Gollmar winter quarters along the Baraboo River.*



# The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth



**THE REALISTIC JUNGLE MENAGERIE.** AS SEEN IN THE GREAT PALMARAM AT OLYMPIA. A MARVELOUS DISPLAY OF WILD ANIMALS AND LIVING CURIOSITIES. NO EXTRA CHARGE.

Barnum & Bailey used this one-sheet Strobridge lithograph in 1897. It depicts the menagerie under an umbrella of palm trees rather than a tent.

**Rare and**

## SAM B. DILL'S 3-RING CIRCUS TOM MIX AND TONY



Sam B. Dill's Circus with Tom Mix and Tony used this half-sheet streamer printed by Donaldson in 1934.

# MONSTER AMAZON

CAPTURED ALIVE  
WITH 127 YOUNG  
ABOUT 500 YEARS OF AGE  
NEARLY 20 FEET IN LENGTH  
WEIGHT OF AN ELEPHANT



THE MOST MASSIVE MOST MAMMOTH AMPHIBIOUS MONSTER EVER EXHIBITED ALIVE

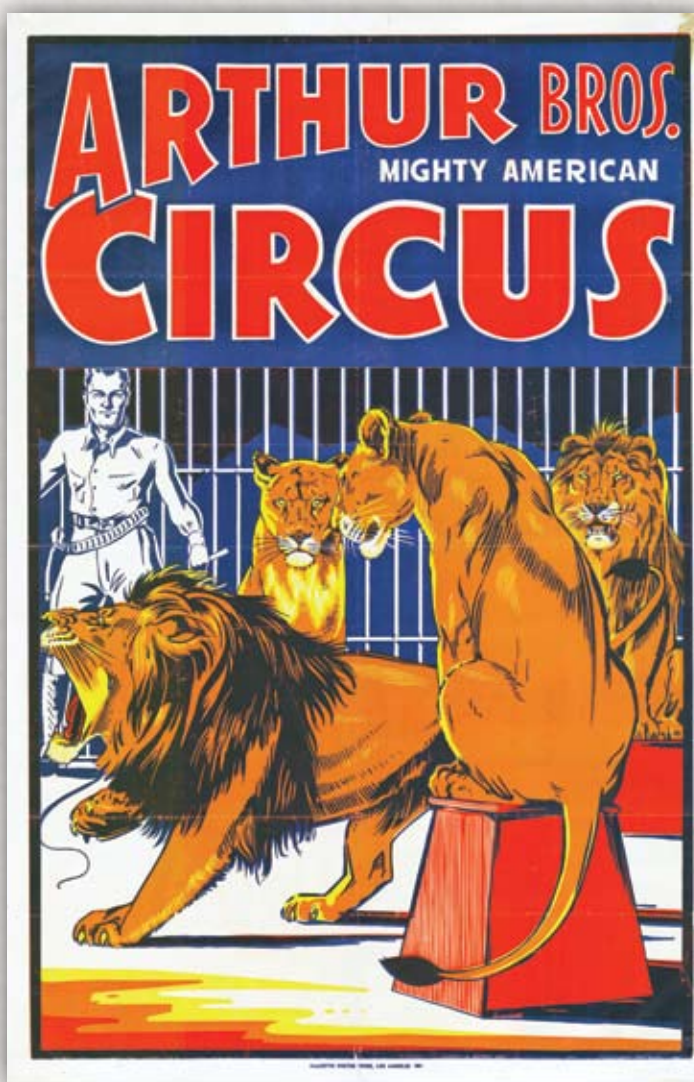
**SHELL BROS. GREATER COMBINED WILD ANIMAL SHOWS**

Schell Bros. Wild Animal Shows, which operated from 1929 through 1936, took some artistic license with this one-sheet printed by Standard of St. Paul.

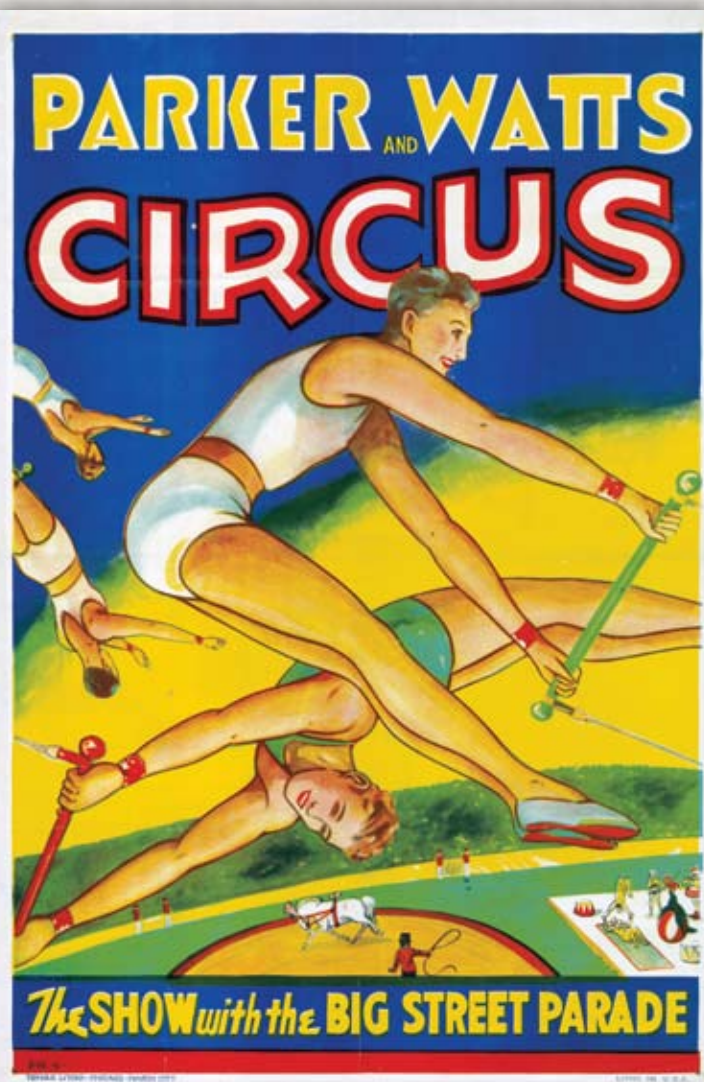


## Spectacular Posters

*This uncommon stock poster was printed by Donaldson Litho. based in Newport, Kentucky.*



Arthur Bros., which operated 1943-1945, was promoted with this one-sheet printed by Majestic Poster Press of Los Angeles.

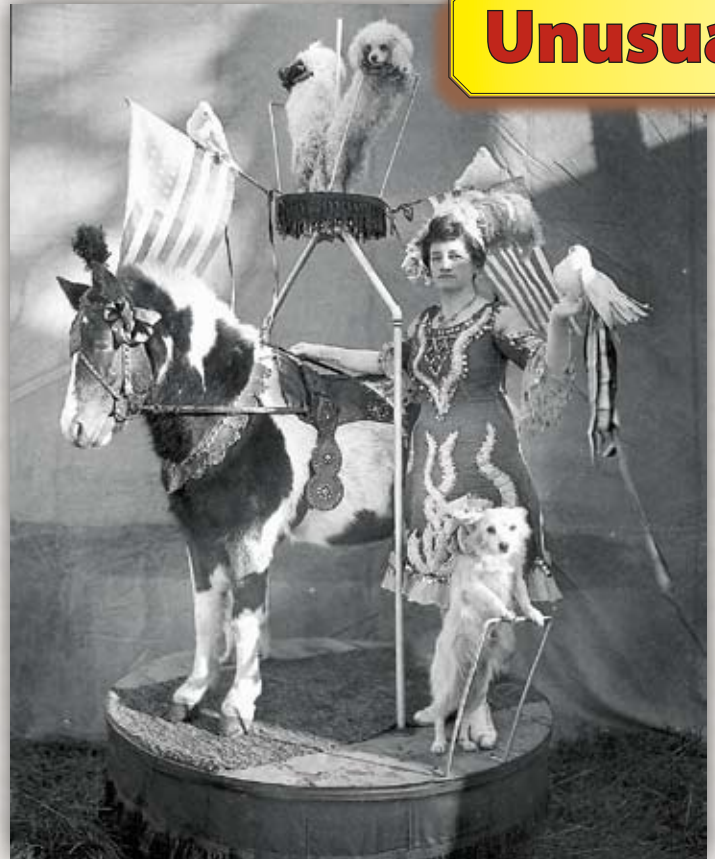


Temple Litho. printed this one-sheet for Parker and Watts which operated in 1938 and 1939. Paul Luckey, one of Circus World Museum's earliest employees, played in the band.





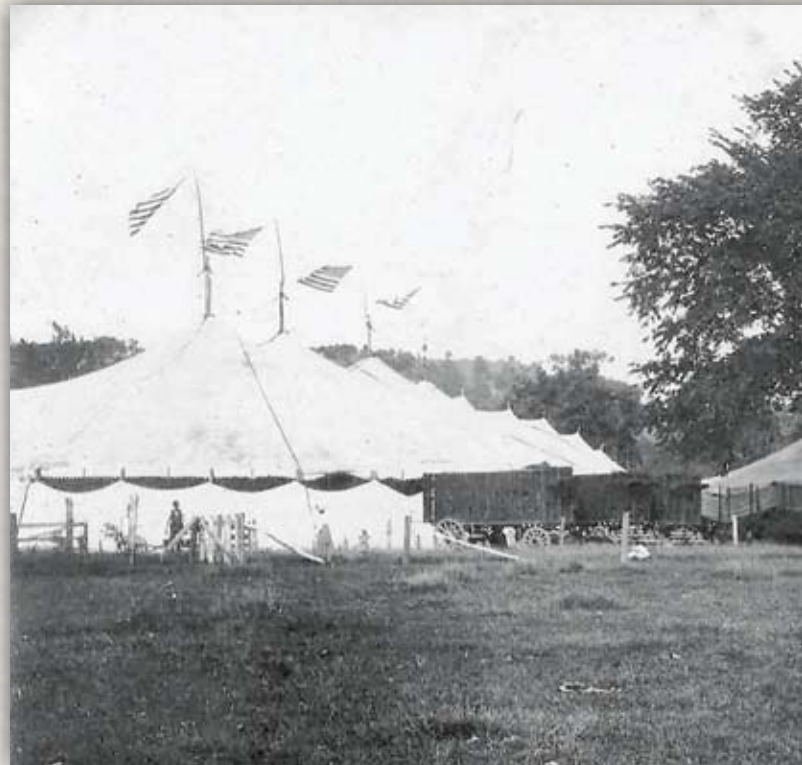
P. T. Barnum brought Fedor Jeftichew (1868-1904), better known as Jo Jo the Dog Faced Boy, to the United States in 1884. Copies of this 1885 cabinet card were sold in the Barnum & London side show.



Writing on this photograph identifies the performer as "E. Holcum from Baraboo." The circus where this novelty act appeared is not identified.



James Coffey (1852-?) was 5' 6" tall and weighed about 70 pounds as an adult. His moniker of the "Human Skeleton" was not far from the truth.



Pierce found this Dode Fisk lot scene in a postcard show in Rockford, Illinois. He was able to make out a couple of the letters on one of the wagons beside the four-pole big top at



# Photographic Documentation



*Burr Robbins claimed "A Mighty Whale from the Frozen Artic Ocean" among its magnificent features in 1887. The town where this large billing stand was pasted in early September has not been confirmed.*



*the left, and then verified the show title after reversing the image to a negative. Dode Fisk was a ten-car railroad show during its final years of operation.*



*A muscular Mike Rooney from Baraboo posed beside a stately dapple-grey in 1904.*





Sixteen women are seen in this photograph working in the Barnum & Bailey wardrobe department in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The interior of this structure has sometimes been misidentified as being at the Ringling winter quarters in Baraboo.







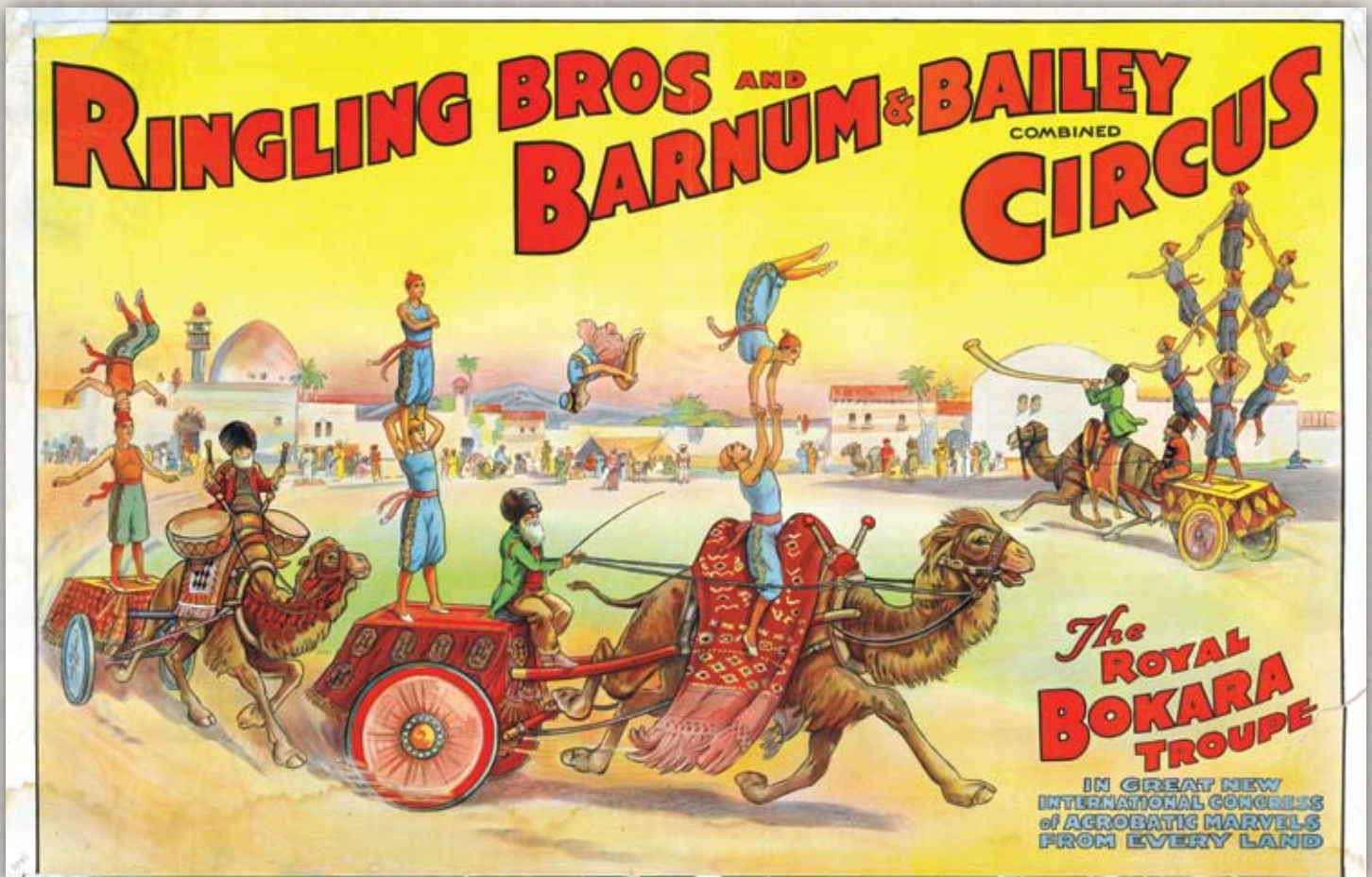
*The Pierce archive includes thousands of photographs taken by Ralph himself like this one that recorded the last performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania on May 2, 2016.*







Artists at Erie Litho. and Ptg. Co. produced this watercolor used in the development of the poster below.



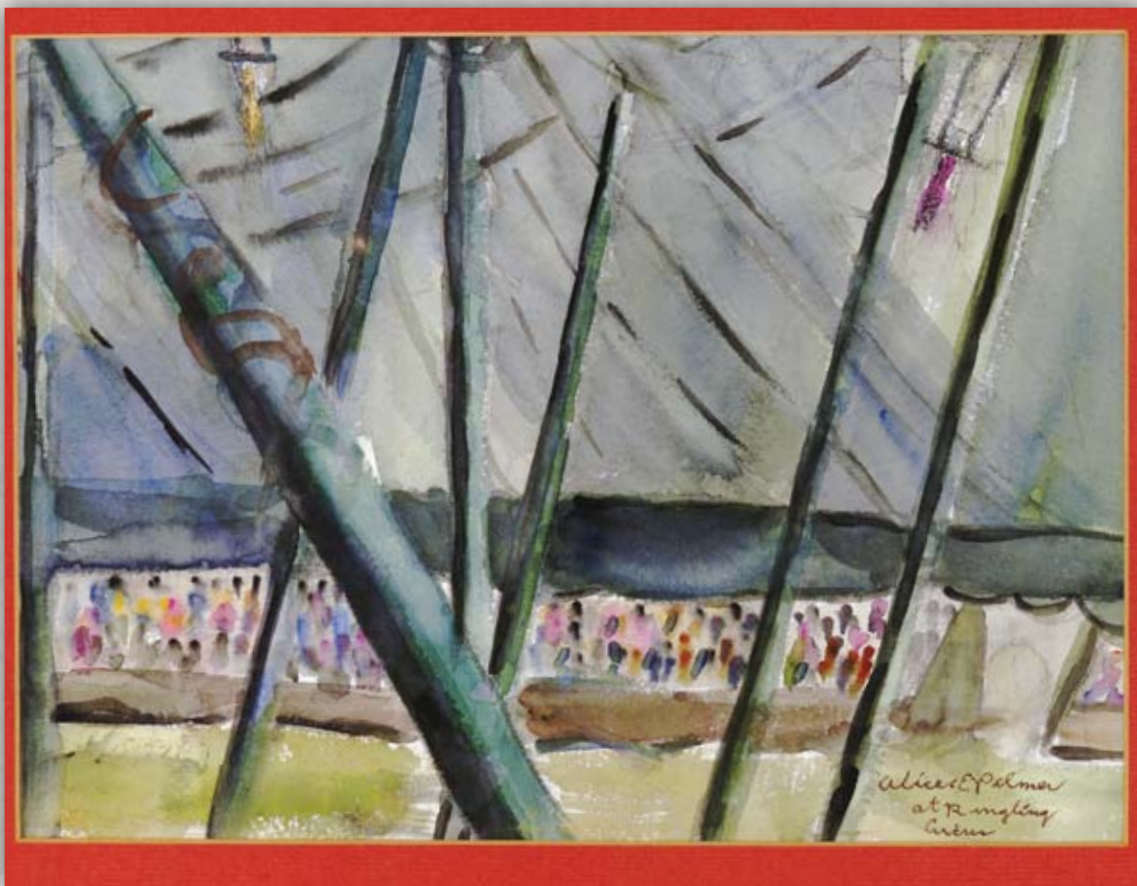
Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey promoted The Royal Bokara Troupe with this one-sheet lithograph in 1936 when Sam Gumpertz was vice president and general manager of the big show.



# Poster Art & Painting

In the late 1940s, artist Alice E. Palmer created this watercolor which she labeled "at Ringling Circus." The slanting lines of the tent quarter poles and the seams on the canvas in the background help to establish an impressionistic quality for the painting.

Below, E. Roe created this soft artwork for a classic equestrienne six-sheet lithograph in 1894.



This original costume design by Pascal Jacob was created for Feld Entertainment's Kaleidoscope c. 1998. The artwork was presented to Ralph Pierce during a visit by Jacob to the Pierce home in Baraboo.



# Colorful Collectible Categories



This 1904 E. T. Paull sheet music printed by Hoen & Co. of Richmond, Virginia offered a fabulous portrayal of performers and animals parading around the ring. Note the band in the upper right.



Dode Fisk Shows operated out of Wonewoc, Wisconsin for five seasons. This unused complimentary ticket dates from c. 1908.





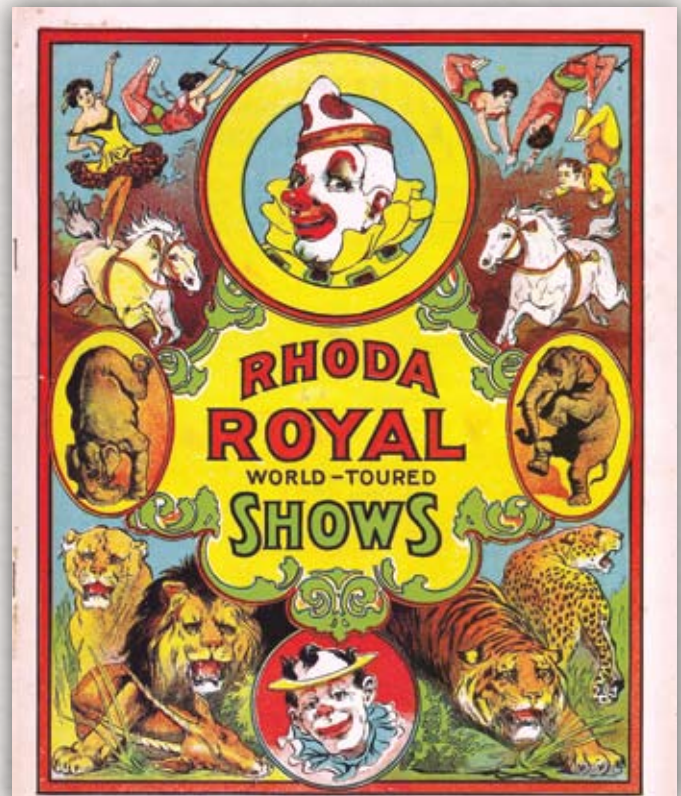
Carl Hagenbeck-Wallace songster, 1918.



The Lindemann brothers operated their large truck circus in the 1920s and 1930s. Seils-Sterling wintered in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and sometimes offered a four-ring performance.

OFFICIAL ROUTE CARD				
ROBBINS BROS. CIRCUS				
PERMANENT ADDRESS ROCHESTER, INDIANA				
HOOT GIBSON				
SEASON 1938 Allow Mail Enough Time to Reach Points Named Before Date Given No. 10				
DATE	TOWN	STATE	R. R.	MILES
JULY 18th	MANCHESTER	N. H.	BOSTON & MAINE	46
" 19	WORCESTER	MASS.	BOSTON & MAINE	67
" 20	NORWICH	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	59
" 21	NEW BRITAIN	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	93
" 22	STAMFORD	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	69
" 23	BRIDGEPORT	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	23
Sunday				
" 25	WATERBURY	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	32
" 26	DANBURY	CONN.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	46
" 27	POUGHKEEPSIE	N. Y.	N. Y. N. H. & H.	47
" 28	MIDDLETOWN	N. Y.	N. Y. N. H. & H. & ERIE	46
" 29	NEWBURG	N. Y.	ERIE	32
" 30	MORRISTOWN	N. J.	ERIE & D. L. & W.	90
Sunday				
AUG. 1	PATERSON	N. J.	D. L. & W.	29
TOTAL MILEAGE				6467

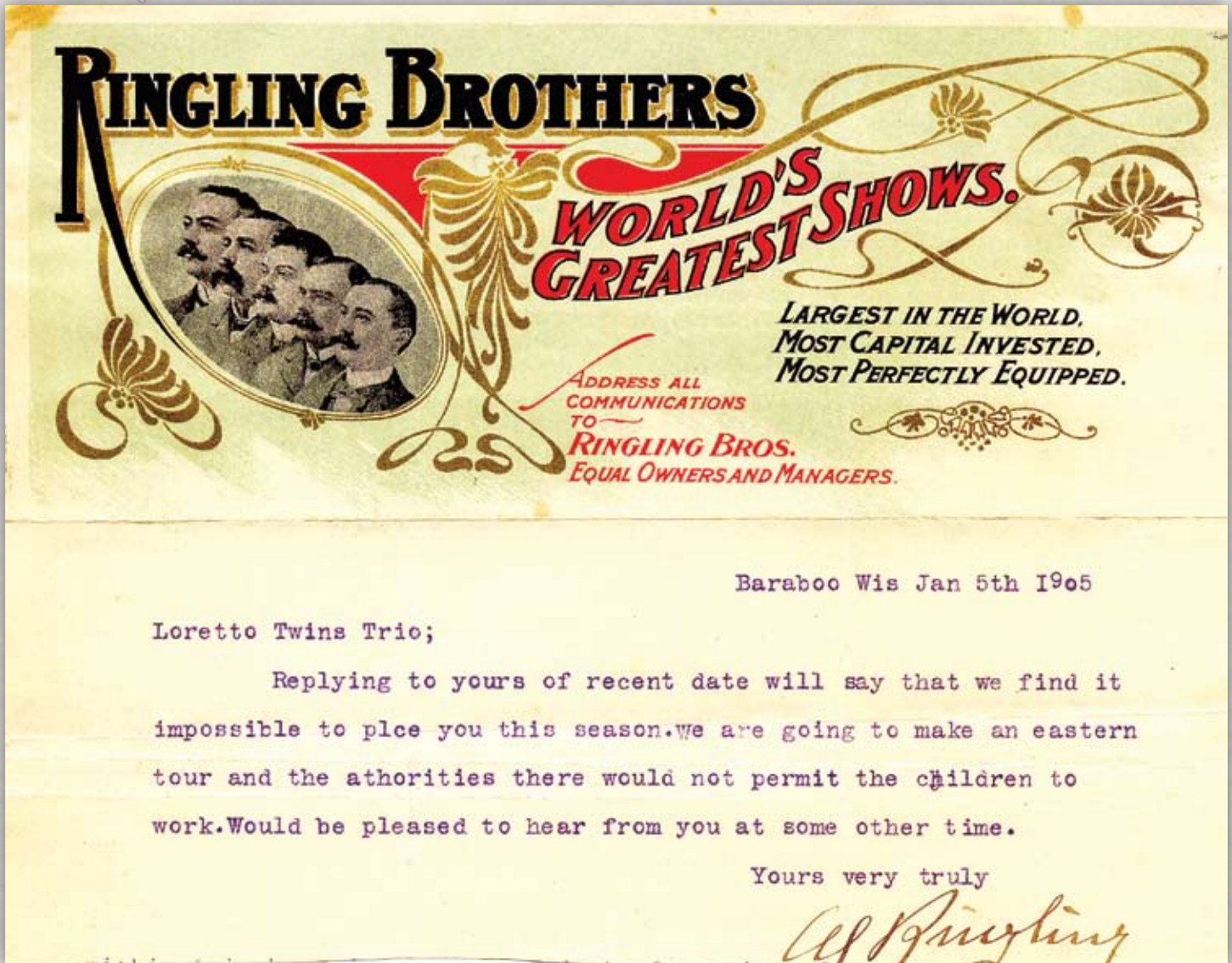
Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell, owners of the Cole Bros. railroad show, took out a second unit reviving the Robbins Bros. title in 1938.



The multi-page 1921 Rhoda Royal courier was designed in a classic montage style with clowns, aerialists, equestrians, elephants and jungle wild animals surrounding the show's title.



## Artifacts and



It was likely a cold day in Wisconsin when Al Ringling wrote this letter explaining why the circus was declining to hire an act performed by children.



From 1920



# Items of Special Interest



From 1941



This oilcloth banner hung in downtown locations where advance tickets to the Ringling Bros. Circus were sold. The banner that measures 26" x 36" was originally collected by circus fan Bill Kasiska of Baraboo and was acquired by Ralph Pierce in 1978.

## Special Notice.

Performers will avoid trouble and confusion on the opening date of the season by strictly conforming to the appended rules regarding trunks. The following sizes **ONLY** will be transported by the Ringling Brothers:

Gentlemen Performers, size 18 x 18 x 24.

All Lady Performers, size 18 x 22 x 28.

Lady Riders, size 20 x 22 x 30.

Ladies in Spectacle Ballet, Concert, Etc., size 15 x 18 x 24.

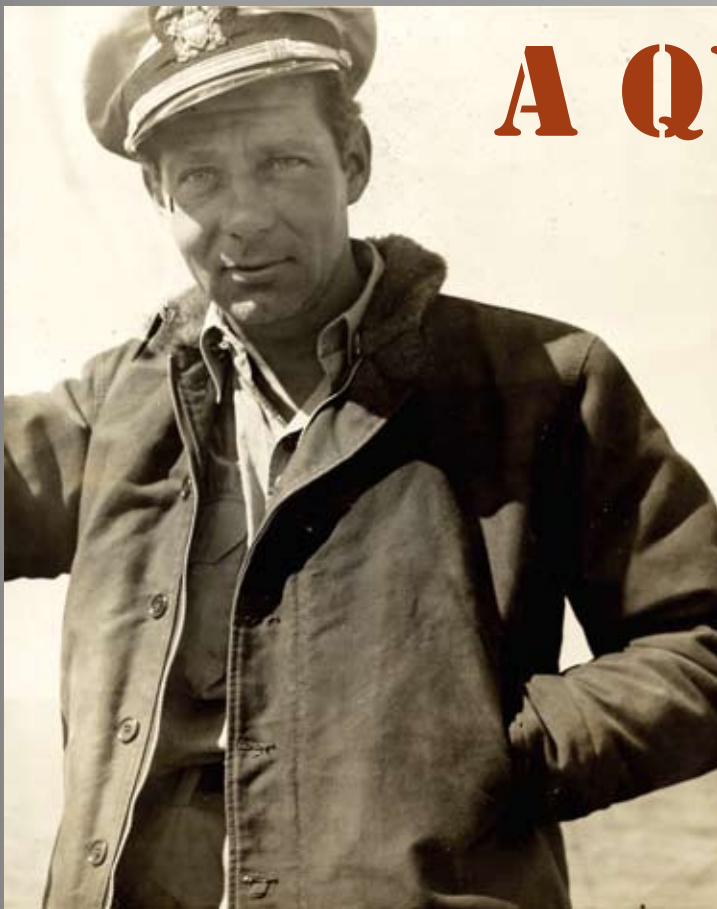
*This Special Notice outlines size restrictions for the trunks carried by the show. It was likely included with signed contracts being returned to performers before the season began. Note that "Lady Riders" were allowed the largest trunks.*

## About the Author

Ralph Pierce has been a member of the Circus Historical Society for more than 45 years, and holds a Bachelor of Science in Museum Studies from the University of Wisconsin. He worked on more than 35 major parades staged by Circus World Museum in Milwaukee, Baraboo and Chicago, and in 1984 he served as President of the Baraboo Ringling Centennial Association. He worked as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College Chef and later served as Director of Athletic Catering for the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He is a former President of the Mid-Continent Railway Museum and a former President of the Baraboo Chamber of Commerce. Ralph and his wife Joan are the owners of Gem City Amusements, a business that keeps them involved in various circus-related enterprises.







# A QUIET HERO:

## HENRY RINGLING NORTH BEHIND ENEMY LINES

*With years of experience solving problems on the circus lot, Henry Ringling North's ability to make split-second decisions served him well in wartime.*

*by Chris Berry*

*The photographs reproduced in this article are from the Special Collections at Illinois State University's Milner Library in Normal, Illinois. The black and white images are from the Henry Ringling North materials presented to the Milner by John Ringling North II, and the color images are digital scans of original Kodachrome slides taken by Sverre Braathen – each unique photographic collection preserved and made available by the Milner Library.*

On the frosty night of September 8, 1943, a complex operation was unfolding at a railyard in Madison, Wisconsin. Wagons and animals were being loaded onto the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey train, and although the circus was dealing with manpower shortages and transportation issues, those challenges paled when compared to what was the happening on an island 5,000 miles away, where the man in charge faced uncertainty unlike anything he had ever encountered on a circus lot.

By the time the circus trains arrived in Indianapolis the next day, Henry Ringling North had captured 92 German soldiers without firing a shot.<sup>1</sup>

"My father spoke very little about the war, but he was

very proud of his service and of the Silver Star that he earned," said John Ringling North II more than 75 years after World War II ended.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways Lieutenant Henry Ringling North's experience was no different than any of the 16 million Americans who put on a uniform, did their patriotic duty, and when the guns were silenced, returned to civilian life.

"Mine was a simple mission in a rather complex war," he once wrote,<sup>3</sup> yet the actual record of Henry Ringling North's service reveals a man whose courage was matched only by his modesty.

The seeds of Buddy North's wartime assignment were planted in the summer of 1941, when Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey was making its final coast-to-coast tour before the attack on Pearl Harbor. With war clouds gathering, President Franklin Roosevelt reached out to a former Army officer turned Wall Street lawyer named William Donovan to help get the nation on a war footing.

Roosevelt gave "Wild Bill" Donovan increasingly important assignments, including a trip to Europe in the summer of 1941. In London he met with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Ian Fleming, the British intelligence





*On September 8, 1943, circus president Robert Ringling was photographed on the lot in Madison, Wisconsin. Five thousand miles away his cousin Henry Ringling North was leading a group of commandos into combat.*

officer who would later gain fame for creating the fictional character James Bond. Fleming told Donovan that America's coming involvement in the war would require a certain type of soldier; men of "absolute discretion, sobriety, devotion to duty, languages, and wide experience."<sup>4</sup>

Donovan took the advice to heart and wrote a memo to Roosevelt that proposed an international secret service focused on intelligence gathering and covert operations, and staffed by young officers who were "calculatingly reckless," with "disciplined daring" and trained for "aggressive action."<sup>5</sup>

Henry Ringling North became one of those men.

Although North enlisted in the Navy Reserve shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, his circus responsibilities deferred his service until early 1943 after he and his brother John left their executive positions with the show. The brothers resigned at a meeting of the board of directors when other members of the Ringling family rejected the Norths' plan to funnel profits from the circus to war charities in exchange for government assistance with transportation and manpower. Robert Ringling, cousin of the Norths, was then elected President of the circus.<sup>6</sup>

With the deferment no longer necessary, Buddy North

was called to active duty, and at the age of 32, the idea of serving in the secret Office of Strategic Services was intriguing. For Donovan, a young executive on the team with the experience of solving complex problems on a daily basis was a perfect match. "I wangled my way into the OSS," North quipped. "On the whole I found it more agreeable to be shot at by the Nazis than sniped at by my relatives."<sup>7</sup>

North was commissioned as a Lieutenant (junior grade) and began training in Washington, D.C. It was there that he developed a friendship with Michael Burke, who served with North during the war and in 1955 joined the circus as Executive Director, a position he held through the abbreviated 1956 season. It was during the invasion of Sicily that the pair reconnected.

The first wave of American and British soldiers landed in Sicily July 9, 1943 and within days they were joined by North and a small OSS group, setting up headquarters at a villa on the outskirts of Palermo. North's job at the time was finance officer for the unit, but he was looking for more action. Soon he was transferred to Lieutenant John Shaheen's Strategic Operations team and, along with Burke, assigned to a secret mission code-named Operation MacGregor.<sup>8</sup>

The initial phase of the clandestine mission required North, Shaheen and Burke to travel by PT boat across the enemy-controlled Tyrrhenian Sea to the mainland of Italy. They were to drop a courier who was tasked with finding a high-ranking Italian Admiral and deliver a letter urging him to surrender his fleet prior to the inevitable invasion of the mainland.

As the sun was setting on August 10, 1943, North and the rest of the party shoved off from Palermo on a fast torpedo boat that took them to the coastal town of Terracina, more than 200 miles inside enemy territory. North and Burke were to row the courier to shore by rubber boat under the moonlit sky, but before they could get underway radar picked up a German E-boat leaving its base. The mission was scrapped for the night and the team returned to Palermo undetected, a roundtrip of 450 miles through enemy waters.

Two nights later the mission was completed, and the courier along with a British agent were dropped off in Calabria near the "toe" of Italy. As the PT boat headed home that night it skimmed the northern coast of Sicily, and North was able to see flashes from the big guns and hear the muffled sound of artillery. It was the U.S. Third Army and the Germans were on the run.<sup>9</sup>

North and Burke returned to Italy two weeks later to retrieve the agents, but they never appeared, their fate unknown. As Burke continued efforts to reach the Italian Admiral, North had a new assignment, and in an unusual pairing of the war, the circus executive was teamed with one of the most famous names in Hollywood.

With most of Sicily now in the hands of the Allies, North was summoned to a meeting at a Palermo hotel room





After years of sleeping on circus trains, Buddy North seemed to have no trouble relaxing on the deck of a naval vessel.

where a team of commandos was briefed by Navy Lieutenant Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. The star of *Gunga Din* and *Robin Hood* was commander of a secret naval unit known as the Beach Jumpers and their mission was to trick the enemy into believing they were under attack, far from the actual landing zone. By amplifying nautical sounds and creating ghost radar blips they created the illusion that a massive force of ships and aircraft was landing in the vicinity.

Lieutenant Fairbanks laid out the mission: The main invasion of Italy would begin early on the morning of September 9, 1943. During the predawn hours, a small task force would land on Ventotene, an island located about 35 miles from the mainland. The mission was important, because of a Nazi radar installation on the island that needed to be neutralized.

The landing party was made up of about 50 paratroopers and a group of eleven OSS specialists led by Lieutenant North. Intelligence indicated that there were not many German soldiers on the island, but the men were told to expect the unexpected, especially if the Italians decided to fight.

At the conclusion of the briefing Fairbanks, the swash-buckling movie star, accurately predicted what was ahead for North when he promised, "...a real game of pirates... capturing islands and starting with Ventotene."<sup>10</sup>

At 10:00 on the night of September 8, 1943 North's landing party reached its rendezvous point off the shore of Ventotene. Those on the island heard amplified sounds from the U.S. destroyer *Knight* and specially outfitted PT boats which made it appear that there was a large armada approaching.

Among those observing the operation was Pulitzer-prize winning author John Steinbeck, who was working as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald-Tribune*. Steinbeck had written a script that was translated into Italian and blared from the loudspeaker of the *Knight*: "Signal your surrender with three lights spaced horizontally. If there is no response in five minutes there will be total destruction."

Three lights instantly appeared. North and the landing party then made their way ashore where they were met by local officials who had arranged for all the Italian soldiers to surrender. They also provided a map to where the German garrison was hiding in the hills.

North sent a message to the *Knight* asking that the ship fire on the enemy position to soften

their position. Unfortunately, the sailors on the destroyer misread the coordinates and it was the Americans who felt the blast. North later wrote, "I never prayed for anything as hard as I did for a complete absence of further naval support."<sup>11</sup>

With dawn approaching, the Germans would soon see through the deception. North later wrote, "If we didn't kill or capture the enemy, the enemy would most certainly do the same by us...so bluff we must and bluff we did."<sup>12</sup>

With a stroke of audacity that would have impressed P. T. Barnum, a white flag was made from a bath towel and the young man who had grown up in a world of circus daring and bravado approached the German position.

Steinbeck was embedded with the paratroopers and wrote about the scene:

"The men hidden below saw the lieutenant challenged, and then they saw him led behind the white stone building. They were waiting for the crack of a rifle shot that would mean the plan had failed. Then the lieutenant appeared again, and this time he was accompanied by three German officers."

North pointed to the ground and two of the officers went back into the building, reappearing with dozens of German soldiers. As they walked down the path, each dropped his rifle, machine gun or grenades where North had pointed.

"My God, he pulled it off!" the Army captain exclaimed as he watched the unarmed North take 87 prisoners from the building.





*Following his wartime service North remained in the Naval Reserve, eventually reaching the rank of Commander.*

The German soldiers were surrounded by about 30 paratroopers and taken to the top floor of the city hall where they were put into four large jail cells.

With the Germans locked up North sat down.

"Any trouble?" the Army captain asked.

"It was too easy. I don't believe it yet."

North then lit a cigarette, and according to Steinbeck his hand was shaking so much that his match nearly went out.

"How many men did you tell them we had?" the captain asked.

"Six hundred," North replied, "and I forgot how many cruisers off-shore."<sup>13</sup>

After the success on Ventotene, North joined other members of the OSS including General Donovan on Capri, 25 miles off the coast of Naples. On the bluffs above the island, a lavish villa looked down on the Mediterranean. A New York socialite had abandoned the home at the start of the war and Donovan had promised that he would protect her property. While he was in Capri, North was assigned to live in the villa and watch over the grounds<sup>14</sup>

Although the Italian army had surrendered, the Germans continued to fight, firing big guns from batteries on

the Italian coast. To counter the Germans, North was given the assignment of shuttling a squad of Army artillery observers to the island of Procida, only a few miles from Italian mainland.

In his official report, North explained what happened next: "No sooner had we tied up than the batteries opened fire. The boat was immediately abandoned by the passengers and crew. I suggested to the boat captain that we try to save the boat and divert the fire by making a run for it."

Though shrapnel hit the boat some 80 times during the shelling, North, the skipper and the machinist mate safely made it around the island to the western harbor where they were able to rescue the American soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

As the Italian island-hopping continued, Lieutenant North was tasked with rescuing a group of anti-fascists from the island of Ponza, 60 miles north of Capri. Among the prisoners on the island were the Duke of Camerino, and Tito Zaniboni, a former Italian official in custody for the attempted assassination of Benito Mussolini.

As the torpedo boats sped toward Ponza on September 25 they were buzzed by the Luftwaffe but when they reached the harbor there was no resistance. "We found that the Germans had gone," North said, "but for some reason they had not taken Zaniboni or the Duke of Camerino with them." North then loaded Zaniboni, his daughter and the Duke onto the PT boat and took them to Capri, rescuing three of Mussolini's most bitter foes.<sup>16</sup>

Although the missions on Procida and Ponza were important, the McGregor team soon had a new, more significant assignment. With the Allies gaining ground, Germany started deploying a powerful new state-of-the-art electromagnetic torpedo that could detonate and destroy a ship by just passing underneath it. The weapon had been developed by an aging Italian Admiral along with a professor from the University of Genoa. Because neither was loyal to the Germans, the OSS was charged with getting them to switch sides in hopes that they would explain how the weapon operated.

Admiral Eugenio Minisini was ready to work with the Americans. When the Germans had been evacuating, Minisini had dumped the remaining torpedoes into the Bay of Naples rather than let them to fall into the hands of the Nazis. Now, with the secret weapons at the bottom of the gulf, Minisini was a wanted man, afraid of being executed by the Gestapo.

The Admiral turned himself into the OSS and Burke was given the assignment of getting him to the United States. North's job was to find the scuttled torpedoes.

Despite his willingness to help, the Admiral was classified as an "enemy agent," and not allowed into the United States. Michael Burke knew that to cut through the bureaucratic red tape he had to meet with the Secretary of the Navy and that meant a harrowing flight to Washington, by way of Tunisia, Ireland and Newfoundland.

Burke met with Navy Secretary Frank Knox and was





*When North returned to Sarasota from Europe, he was welcomed by his son John Ringling North II and the family dog.*

given clearance to bring the Admiral and his wife to the United States. But before he left the Secretary's office, he had one more favor to ask. Burke requested that a ship be assigned to North so that he could start looking for the torpedoes. Knox agreed and sent a cable to Admiral Henry Hewitt who gave North the resources he needed to find the sunken weapons.<sup>17</sup>

The Italian Admiral and his wife were now safely in the hands of the Allies, but the scientist who knew the most about the weapons, Professor Carlos Calosi, was still in hiding. At the same time that Buddy North was overseeing the dredging of the Bay of Naples, Calosi had been located by secret agents in Rome. On Christmas Eve 1943, the professor, dressed as a priest, took a train to the coast where he met with American scientists and explained how the torpedoes worked.

According to a now-declassified document at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, North was able to recover 150 torpedoes from the bottom of the Bay of Naples, along with a hydraulic catapult and other useful equipment. One historian later suggested that North's op-

eration saved the Allies a year's worth of research.<sup>18</sup>

With the torpedoes enroute to America, North and Burke delivered the Admiral and professor to Newport, Rhode Island where the two Italians shared the secrets of the weapons that they had originally designed.

The MacGregor Mission was now complete, but the OSS still needed North and Burke. General Donovan gave them a choice, China or Europe. "I'm for France," North said. Burke agreed and they were soon on their way to England.<sup>19</sup>

North and Burke were waiting for orders in London when the Germans began terrorizing the city with a new weapon. The V-1 "buzz bomb" was a cruise missile designed to cross the English Channel and after reaching London, run out of fuel, drop from the sky and explode.

On the morning of Sunday June 18, 1944, novelist turned war correspondent Ernest Hemingway invited North and Burke to join him for brunch at his London hotel suite. As Hemingway treated the party to bourbon and pancakes, they observed several of the unmanned bombs fly up the Thames, sputter, and drop to the ground some miles away.

Soon one of the missiles appeared closer than the others,





Ernest Hemingway referred to North and Burke as “Hemingstein’s Junior Bearded Commandos” about the time this photograph was taken in Paris in 1944. Hemingway would later write a poetic essay about the circus featured in the Ringling-Barnum souvenir program.

and suddenly the engine cut. As they watched in horror the bomb made a direct hit on a nearby church where parishioners had assembled for Sunday worship. North, Burke and Hemingway rushed to help, but any assistance they could offer was limited. One hundred twenty-one people were killed in the Guard’s Chapel church that morning.<sup>20</sup>

Days later North left London for Normandy, where he was one of the few Naval officers embedded on the battlefield, assigned to photograph German gun emplacements.<sup>21</sup>

Even with the daily stress of the war, the circus was still on North’s mind, and never more so than when he read of the Hartford Fire in the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.

He later wrote, “I have no words to describe my sickened reaction – the ‘horrors of war’ paled by comparison.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the unorthodox nature of OSS operations, officers were still expected to follow basic military protocol. Renegades that they were, North and Burke would occasionally stray, such as when they both grew heavy beards during the summer of 1944. Although the beard was not regulation, North was a Naval officer embedded with the Army, and no Army officer could order him to shave. The beard did eventually cause trouble for North as fellow OSS officer John McClain recalled. According to McClain, on a day when North had to report to Omaha beach, the Navy captain serving as beachmaster was outraged over North’s facial hair, telling him that if he ever saw his beard again, he would ship him home. For North, the choice was obvious. Rather than risk a future encounter with the Navy captain, whenever something was needed from Omaha Beach, the clean-shaven McClain – not North – made the trip.<sup>23</sup>

After the Allies liberated Paris in late August 1944, North and Burke renewed their acquaintance with Ernest Hemingway who was working as a war correspondent for *Collier’s* magazine and living at the Ritz Hotel.

Hemingway took a shine to the two young officers and the three frequently had lunch at the Ritz. One afternoon over cocktails, the author of *A Farewell to Arms* created the Valhalla Club, a reference to the mythological place where dead war heroes were honored. The charter members of the club were Hemingway, North and Burke, who he dubbed “Hemingstein’s Junior Bearded Commandos.”<sup>24</sup>

The friendship that North forged with Ernest Hemingway continued long after the war, and in 1953 the author penned a brief essay in the Ringling circus program where he famously wrote of the circus: “It is the only spectacle that I know that, while you watch it, gives the quality of a truly happy dream.”<sup>25</sup>

North used Paris as his base for the remainder of the war, and when the Allied offensive bogged down in the winter of 1945, he was sent to the Ardennes where he made a brief appearance at the Battle of the Bulge, supporting OSS intelligence operations.<sup>26</sup>

One of North’s final actions in the war was the capture of Herbert Blanckenhorn, chief of protocol for the Nazi





*Although he was still on active duty, North was living in a Paris hotel when Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945.*

government. It was North who took Blanckenhorn to Paris where Hitler's aide told interrogators that he believed the Fuhrer would soon commit suicide.<sup>27</sup>

A few days later Blanckenhorn's prediction came true and on May 8, 1945, the Germans surrendered. With the war in Europe over, Henry Ringling North toasted the victory with friends at his Paris hotel.<sup>28</sup>

From Europe North expected to be sent to the Pacific. "I came home from the war in the summer of 1945," he wrote. "Then the Bomb and VJ Day. I became a civilian again."

With the war over, Buddy North exchanged his navy-blue suit for one made of gray flannel, yet for years he continued his clandestine service even after the Office of Strategic Services transitioned to the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947.

According to John Ringling North II, his father was among a group of World War II veterans who were recruited for covert operations during the Cold War. "He was in the CIA for several years," North said. "He had returned to Italy, and he worked from there."

North's position as a circus executive gave him a plausible cover and access to locations in eastern Europe where he could gather intelligence for the United States government. In addition to his undercover work North continued

to serve in the Navy Reserve well into the 1950s, receiving promotions and eventually reaching the rank of Commander, a senior-grade officer equivalent to Lieutenant Colonel in the other services.

Even though Henry Ringling North spent his later years in Italy, Ireland and Switzerland, he always considered himself an American first, and shortly after his death on October 2, 1993 his remains were returned to the United States where they were interred with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, where he rests among more than 400,000 others who served their country, thousands of them veterans of World War II.

Like many veterans, Henry Ringling North rarely spoke of his combat experiences, and most of his stories are now lost forever, but more than 75 years later his son remembered the pride that he had in his service to the United States, recognized in his Silver Star citation which stated:

"...With utter disregard for his own personal safety, Lieutenant North carried out daring and intricate plans with brilliant success. His outstanding efficiency, extraordinary bravery and unswerving devotion to duty were in keeping with the traditions of the United States Naval Service."<sup>29</sup>





When this photograph was taken in August 1941, Henry Ringling North was developing leadership and problem-solving skills that served him well in wartime. Like many veterans, a return to civilian life brought him back to his pre-war occupation. In Henry Ringling North's case, he resumed his career as an executive with The Greatest Show on Earth.

John Ringling North II once asked his father why he served. The response should not come as a surprise. "He told me that he did it for me."<sup>30</sup>

## Acknowledgements

The story of Henry Ringling North's wartime service could not have been told without the support of John Ringling North II, Maureen Brunsdale, Jim Dexheimer and Mark Schmitt. **BW**

## Endnotes

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11. North, *Island Interlude*, op. cit.
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15. Dwyer, op. cit., p. 46.
16. Don Whitehead, "Circus Man Stars in THE Show," *New York Daily News*, Sept. 26, 1943, p. 3.
17. Burke, op. cit., pp. 107-108.
18. Mike Sielski, "Star in the Shadows," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 15, 2019, p. D-12.
19. Burke, op. cit., p. 109.
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21. Jim Dexheimer, telephone interview with the author, Aug. 8, 2020.
22. North, Alden Hatch, op. cit., p. 329.
23. John McClain, "Three Ringer Rings the Bell," *New York Journal-American*, Apr. 17, 1965, p. 11.
24. Burke, op. cit., p. 113.
25. Ernest Hemingway, "The Circus," *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Magazine and Program*, 1953, p. 7.
26. North, Alden Hatch, op. cit., p. 325.
27. Smith, op. cit., p.p. 234, 407.
28. A series of photographs from the Henry Ringling North Collection at the Milner Library, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, show North and friends celebrating VE Day in a Paris hotel room.
29. James Forrestal, Secretary of the Navy for President Harry S. Truman, "Silver Star Citation," Henry Ringling North Collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.
30. John Ringling North II, op. cit.



# ZIRATRON: ISRAEL'S FIRST CIRCUS

by Stav Meishar



*Ziratron circus program for the 1950/1951 season*

Israel's very first circus, founded in 1950, was named Ziratron - which is a hybrid of two Hebrew words: "Zira" (an arena or manège) and "Te'atron" (theater). It was the brainchild of 36 discharged and disabled soldiers, who established a cooperative and invested the hefty sum of 35,000 liras in the founding of the circus - most of it raised via loans from the Office for Rehabilitation of Veterans. In the beginning, the Administrative Director was Aron Berman and the Artistic Director was Shlomo (Sam) Kalinhof.

"We are professionals, and some of us have spent years working in some of Europe's most important circuses," explained the secretary of the cooperative, Lipi Hirsch, when interviewed for the newspaper *Davar*. According to Hirsch, he and his friends made sure the circus was "100 percent" legit. "We have invited the very best - flying acrobats, clowns, bicycle riders, animal trainers, as well as a big orchestra to accompany the performances."

The circus had its Opening Night on Tuesday May 16, 1950. Soon after the opening, the Ziratron's fame rose and circus became a popular medium of entertainment in Israel. In those days, the young country was inhabited by hundreds of thousands of "olim chadashim" (new immigrants) who had yet to master the Hebrew language and could not access Israeli theater or cinema. Thus, the circus provided them

with a source of light entertainment that the entire family could enjoy.

The Ziratron received the support of the Ramat Gan Municipality, and it was in Ramat Gan that they started their circus - on five dunams of land (approx. 4,500 square meters or 1.1 acres). The venue they built was a canvas tent with a single ring. Arranged in-the-round, the ring was encircled by rows of seating that could hold up to 2,500 spectators. People nicknamed it "The Canvas Colosseum." Beyond their Ramat Gan home, the Ziratron also had a permanent location for its shows in the city of Haifa.

The Ziratron staged mostly circus performances, showcasing "acrobatics, magic tricks, clowns, bicycle riders, dogs, horses, elephants, trained monkeys and many other elements of courage and speed accompanied by much humor." Later on, trained wild animals were also incorporated.

The performances attracted thousands of kids and adults from all over the country and won rave reviews.

Two of the Israeli Ziratron artists were Zila and her first husband Charlie Klein. Zila Klein was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1927. She met Charlie when she was 18 years old and one year later, she married him and joined the circus alongside him. She was an acrobat, dancer and a skater, both on regular skates as well as ice skates. She performed at the



circus until her daughter was born when she was 31 years old, at which point she retired.

Charlie Klein was born in Hungary in 1907. He survived World War II by way of street performing, hiding his Jewish identity and traveling throughout Europe via train for a few years, until he managed to escape Europe and travel to Israel. He was a clown, stilt-walker and the catcher/base in acrobatic acts.

Another colorful character in the Ziratron was Zippora Zabbari (born 1908), a middle-eastern dancer, trick rope artist and horse rider. Zippora was born in Israel but left for Prague when she was 21. There she was known as "Miss Palestine" and dipped her toes in circus for the first time, picking up horse-riding and rope tricks. Zippora later moved to Berlin where she further developed her circus skills. She performed as a duo with her second husband, a circus man, in acts of horse riding, rope tricking and knife throwing. Zippora escaped Germany for Israel on the eve of World War II.

The Ziratron's beloved clowns were Muky & Alex - whose full stage names were Muky Mukyon and Alex Alizon (roughly translating to Muky Clown and Alex Cheerful). Alex (1919-1991) was born Akiva Rokenstein in Chernivtsi, Romania (today Ukraine) into a family of carpenters. From a young age he was funny and excelled at balancing tricks, and he was spotted by a professional clown from the Chernivtsi Circus - the Great Alfonso - who was so impressed by Alex he invited him to become his assistant. Alex was only 15 years old at the time, and he left his home to join the circus. Later he became a soldier in the Red Army and was captured during WWII and sent to a concentration camp in Transnistria. He survived the camp and in 1945 went to Israel aboard a ship.

Muky (1889-1981) was born Ya'akov Goldstein in Sofia, Bulgaria. He was a clown all throughout his adult life, and in 1950 the Ziratron's director Kalinhof introduced him to Alex. Muky was 30 years older than Alex, and much more experienced, thus Alex became his student and stage partner.

When the Ziratron was founded, Muky & Alex became its "house" clowns and performed in all of its shows. They each had their own style: Muky was the wise and funny clown, and Alex was the naive and serious clown. Muky would often humorously hit Alex, and Alex would receive the blows. Eventually, they added a third clown - Charlie Klein who walked on stilts - to their act.



*Israeli weightlifter, Bracha Ya'akovov, was flanked in this 1951 newspaper photograph by Ziratron's celebrated clowns Muky and Alex.*

Avi Koren, an Israeli lyricist and translator, was but five years old when the Ziratron first opened. He and his friends used to sneak into the circus frequently, blending in with paying audience members. He wrote of his experience thus:

"Inside the tent, which was boiling in the summer and leaking in the winter, we witnessed the whole wide world: acrobats walking on tightrope, flaming torches in their hands, above them only a roof of canvas and beneath them only a net; dogs leaping through flaming hoops; monkeys sucking on baby bottles; dancing horses, bowing down to the instructions of the fairest of circus ladies... and once they had rode out to the sound of the orchestra, bowing their heads towards the audience, in came Muky & Alex - 'The World's Funniest Clowns.' That's what the ad said. And they, Muky & Alex - one hoarse and the other mute - would fall, tumble, flip, pour water on each other, and get tangled up in the net."

Although the Ziratron was founded and managed by Israelis, most of its performers were from other countries; visiting artists were recruited during the scouting trips of the Ziratron's director - mainly to Spain, Switzerland, Greece and Turkey.





*Redley's Ice Review was one of many productions to be hosted in Ziratron's "canvas colosseum" during 1954.*

A few of the international circus artists who performed at the Ziratron included:

Benji De la Cour, a "tall, stately blond equestrian" who was with the show during the 1951 summer season. Benji and her husband Yves had been employed with Cirque Medrano in Paris the year before.

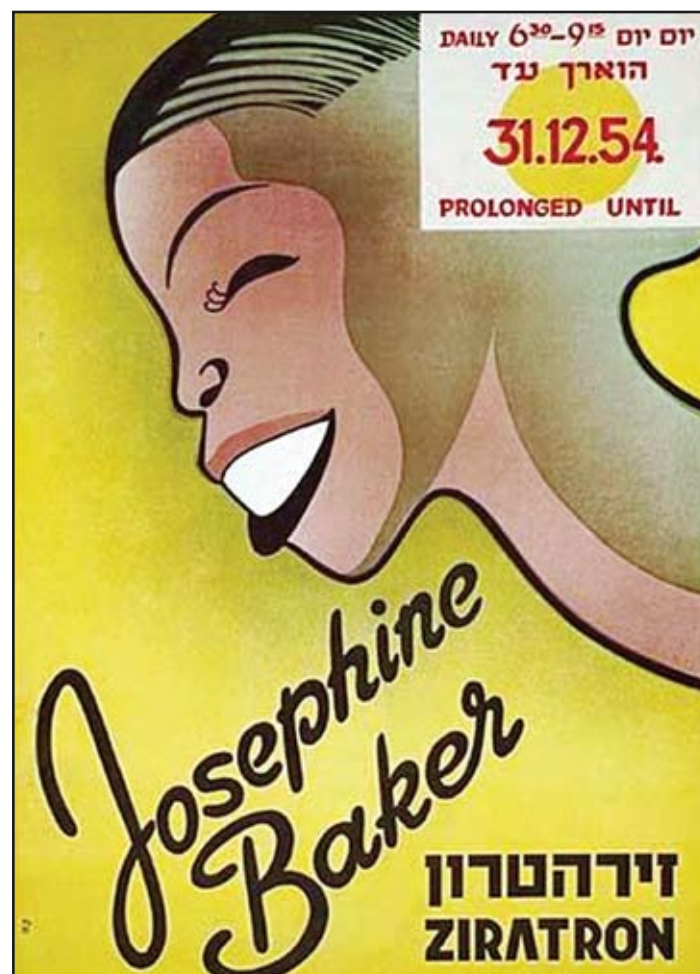
The Marçonis, the stage name of brother aerialists Pierre and Lucien Guillon, performed their airplane act (a five-month contract starting July 1951).

A Dutch riding act by the name of Trio Royal, comprised of siblings Rita, Isabella and Bent Brunn was there for the 1951-1952 season. Their father, Joseph Brunn, conducted the horses.

A big organizational change seems to have occurred in 1954. The company previously registered as "Ziratron Workers Cooperative, LTD" had either been dissolved or rebranded as "Ziratron Public Entertainments Company, LTD." While the Ziratron continued to do business under the same name, the organizational change was evident in the kind of performances they started to produce. Beginning in 1954, the Ziratron also hosted plays, boxing matches, musical concerts and more, as its popularity increased even further.

A notable performance was that of the world-renowned black entertainer, French Resistance agent, and civil rights activist Josephine Baker in 1954. The entertainment magazine *Variety* reported Ms. Baker's performance thus: "[The Ziratron's] attraction for the two weeks in December was Josephine Baker, who gave two performances daily to sellout audiences. Prices were 50c (for children) to \$3. The government gets 40% of the intake."

At that time, the Ziratron was managed by Rainer L. Grosskopf who obtained a yearly rental arrangement that started in September 1954. Grosskopf's father, a composer, conductor and theatre operator in Berlin, wrote some of Ms. Baker's first songs. He was killed by Hitler's Schutzstaffel



*The internationally acclaimed Josephine Baker was featured at Ziratron in December 1954.*



(SS) guards after refusing to conduct in Hitler's presence.

Though the Ziratron was popular, things were far from rosy. According to the Ziratron's directors, Mr. Grosskopf refused their advice and made bad business decisions which led to heavy debts. Many letter exchanges between the Ziratron and various state authorities, as early as 1952, show the Ziratron required constant financial support to be able to bring artists to Israel, and these letters complained that Grosskopf's management put the company out of favor with the state authorities. In the months that followed, the Ziratron was forced to close, its property suffered severe flood damage and it remained shut down for eight months.

Additionally, Israel's political position as a young country surrounded by rival Arab nations also created challenges for the circus. In 1956, the Ziratron hosted (not for the first time) Redley's Circus on Ice. This was at the time of the Suez Crisis, known to Israelis as the Sinai War. Because of the conflict, the shows were poorly attended.



*Ziratron was a popular entertainment for thousands of new Israelis who immigrated to the Jewish state after World War II.*

Fritz Shlezinger photograph



*Traditional circus acts appeared at Ziratron in Ramat-Gan in the fall of 1954.*

The owner had to slash his performers' pay, telling them they would have to pay their own fare home if they wanted to leave. The skaters who remained had to sleep in the same tents as the circus animals.

In November 1958, the members of the Ziratron cooperative decided to build a permanent home for their circus in the neighboring and much larger city of Tel-Aviv. The land chosen for this purpose was then far away from the main areas of nightlife and leisure. The building, envisioned to look like an indoor circus (similar to the original Ramat Gan chapiteau), was designed by Aharon Doron (1917-2012), an independent and award-winning architect.

Construction was supposed to last three to four months, and in June 1959 the Ziratron began dismantling its Ramat Gan tent with the intention of moving into the permanent Tel-Aviv building as soon as construction was completed. Alas, some disagreements, financial troubles and budget deficits soon halted construction, and the skeleton of the building was left deserted and unfinished.

At that time the Ziratron was still supporting and rehabilitating wounded soldiers – a letter to the Israeli government dated March 10, 1959 lists seven such men who were among the Ziratron's founders. Other records show that during various times throughout the 1950s, the Ziratron supported between 30 and 70 families of veteran, wounded and discharged soldiers.

As the skeleton of the building remained to haunt the city, the Ziratron seems to have gone through yet another organizational change. There were no more reports of performances, circus or otherwise, at the Ziratron's "Canvas Colosseum" in Ramat Gan. After a decade of spectacular





*The haunting skeleton of the unfinished Ziratron building in Tel-Aviv stood vacant for five years.*

shows and much love from Israeli audiences, the Ziratron appears to have fizzled out of existence as quickly as it had appeared. However, the company registered as “Ziratron Public Entertainments Company, LTD” continued to produce shows. In February 1960, it brought the Polish State Circus to Israel on a six-month contract, to perform at Kikar Ha’Medina (translates as “The State Square”) – still under the “Ziratron” brand.

Bringing the Polish State Circus to Israel was quite a logistical feat. It required visas for 80 people and the transit of about 75 animals. This necessitated not only the financial and diplomatic support of the State of Israel, but also the collaboration of three theatrical agents: Jakob Ori, an independent theatrical agent based in Haifa, and Aron Berman and Shlomo Kalinhof, directors of the Ziratron.

Since its inception in 1950, the Ziratron board rotated its members as directors, many serving for more than one term. As the Ziratron ceased its physical operation in Ramat Gan and began producing shows at Kikar Ha’Medina, its first duo of directors, Berman and Kalinhof, also became its last.

Throughout the 1960s, Kikar Ha’Medina replaced the Ziratron tent as the main arena for visiting circuses, including Circus Medrano that came almost every year brought to Israel by impresario Jakob Ori (the same theatrical agent who co-produced the Polish State Circus’s visit to Israel in 1960 with the Ziratron). In fact, there were so many circuses performing at Kikar Ha’Medina that it coined a phrase: “The State of Israel is like the State Square: half the time circus, half the time mud”.

In 1964, five years after the construction of the Ziratron’s building halted, the skeleton of the building was purchased by Israeli businessman Joseph Epstein who used the

remnants for the construction of the “Cinerama” hall, where many films, concerts and other events were hosted for decades thereafter (the building was eventually demolished in 2016). In the beginning, there was some hope that the new building could be used for Ziratron circus shows, but that dream never materialized.

To the unsuspecting viewer, it would appear that the Ziratron had died when its tent was dismantled in 1959, and was replaced by the international circuses visiting Kikar Ha’Medina throughout the 1960s. But not exactly: It was “Ziratron Public Entertainments Company, LTD” that imported these foreign circuses to perform



*Jakob Ori and Ziratron brought the Polish State Circus to Israel in 1960.*



at Kikar Ha'Medina, even though its venue in Ramat Gan was no more.

Strangely, the company was no longer doing business as the Ziratron. That name had completely disappeared from both marketing and programs, and was replaced by the name of the man who presided over the company and was its first and last director, "Impresario A. Berman" (Aron Berman).

In 1967, Joseph Epstein (owner of the Ziratron-Cinerama building) went bankrupt and the Israeli court system ordered his companies to be dismantled and sold. Among the assets was the Ziratron building. The following year, in July 1968, "Ziratron Public Entertainments Company, LTD" was placed up for auction.

It remains unclear whether at the time of the auction the company was owned by Mr. Epstein or by the veterans' cooperative (State records show that Mr. Berman started his own company in June 1969). Either way, after many incarnations, thus came the end of the Ziratron. The cooperative founded by veterans in November 1949, that captivated so many audiences throughout the 1950s and 1960s, ceased to exist. It paid its very last debt to the legal receiver in July 1973.

The two Ziratron clowns – Muky and Alex – continued to perform together long after the Ziratron closed. But the older Muky eventually grew weak and decided to retire. He made a request of Alex – that he would not perform without him. Alex obliged his mentor's request. **BW**

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During the 1960s, Ziratron hosted several foreign tented circuses at Kikar Ha'Medina.

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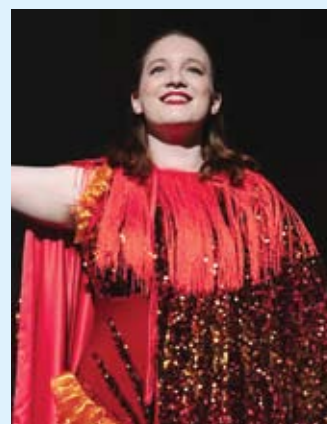
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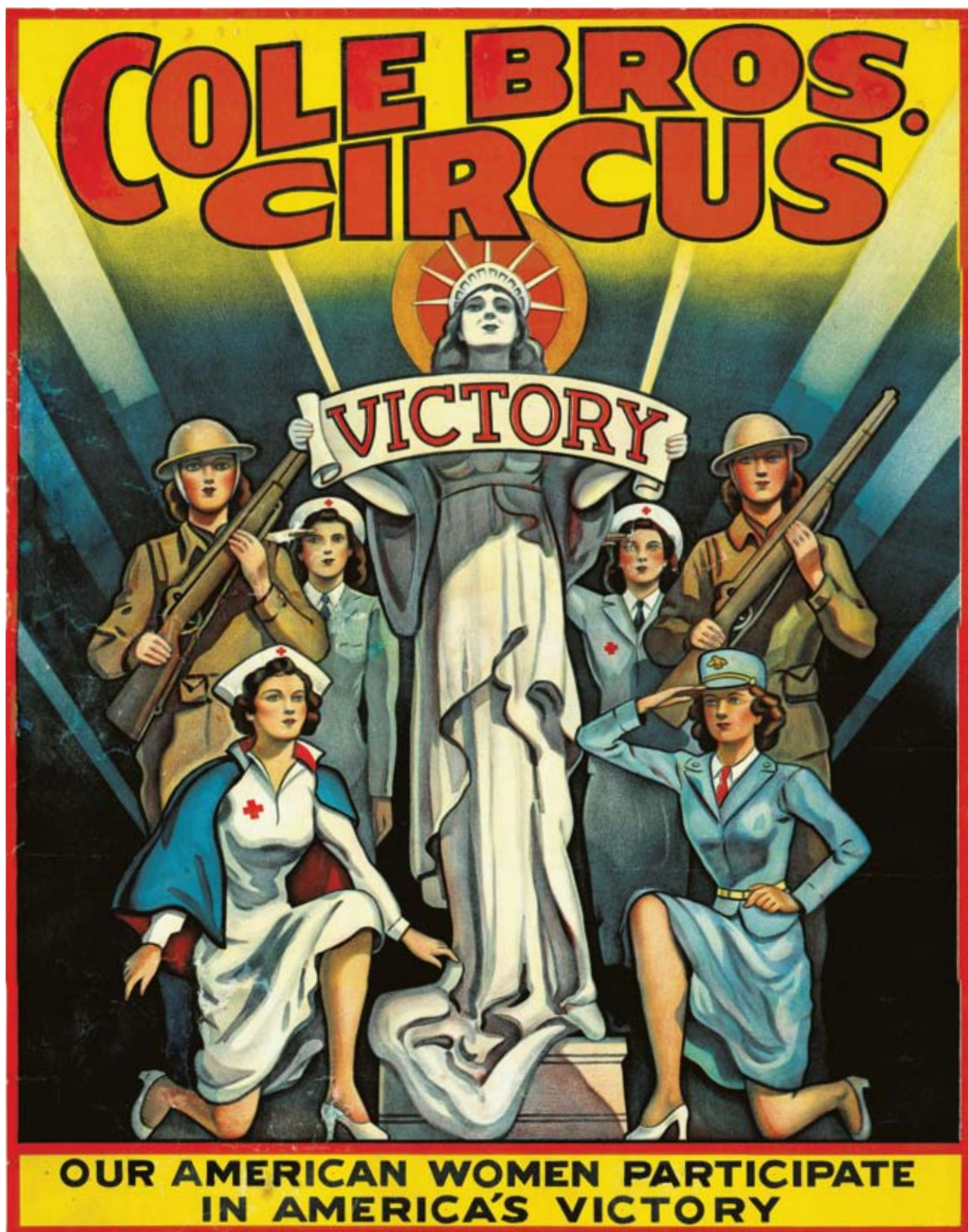
## About the Author

Stav Meishar is an award-winning performance maker, multidisciplinary stage artist, academic researcher and educator. Her work explores the amal-



gamation of history and current affairs via the lens of social justice, using tools from the worlds of theatre, circus, and contemporary performance. Stav's most recent project, *The Escape Act: A Holocaust Memoir*, is a one-woman show mixing puppetry, theatre and circus steeped in seven years of historical research. It is based on the true story of a Jewish acrobat who survived the Holocaust hiding at a German circus, and it examines questions of anti-Semitism and multigenerational-trauma.





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